

Affairs Of the Heart, And Other Things Vikings Don't Talk About

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Summary: Love is a complicated thing, particularly for two lovesick Viking teens. Misunderstandings only make matters worse and ambiguity never helped anyone. How can any lasting solutions be found, when everything else seems determined to get in the way? An arranged marriage AU fic. Rated M for sex and violence in later chapters [Hiccstrid]

1. Chapter 1

****A/N:**** Yeah. So...I am completely revamping my entire storyline, starting from my very first fic. I've been wanting to undertake this project for a while now. I think it will also galvanize me to actually, y'know, finish it and stuff... I've left my one-shot collections because there were some request-based chapters in there. I didn't think it would be fair to delete those.

Maybe.

If this upsets anyone who's followed me for a while, left review, etc., I apologize. I have been going through a lot of very difficult, personal things that have kind of inspired me to start over. The story will largely remained unchanged. I am just tweaking minor details and adding a bunch of new content. My writing is growing up...a little.

I don't know if you call this an actual AU or just a deviation, since it more or less follows the canon timeline while messing around with some relationships and characters. So, um...*shrugs shoulders*

****Disclaimer:**** I don't own the How To Train Your Dragon franchise.

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><p>Growing up is hard.<p>

That was one simple fact that Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III knew painfully well. Never mind that adolescent years were enough of a struggle for the common man—hormones, relationship struggles, and the accompanying angst of self-discovery. Hiccup had to endure the additional woes of growing up a Viking—or rather, he had tried to. Years of one desperate attempt after another to find his place among his tribe had only earned him ridicule. Every valiant effort to fit in had only caused him to be further ostracized. In a culture that fostered conformity to rigidly upheld traditions and standards of behavior, being a forward-thinking individual was about as useful as a flightless dragon with no firepower. In addition to being about as un-Viking in physique as humanly possible, Hiccup's uniqueness was only further insult to his tribe, and to his family name.

Shame? He was no stranger to it.

Feelings of inadequacy? They were lifelong friends.

Isolation and regrets? That relationship was an intimate one.

It had been a miserable existence, living every day as the village embarrassment, surrounded by the constant reminder of everything he could never be. It did not help matters that some of his tribesmen—particularly those his age—took great care to point out his shortcomings daily. As if he was not already well aware of how he failed to measure up...

Then came Toothless, fortuitously shot out of the sky by his own hand. Watching the dragon plummet to the woods had filled him with a sort of nervous excitement. He could not have anticipated that everything was about to change in a drastic and unexpected way. In the darkness, as the dragon's growl grew more distant and he fell from sight, befriending the Night Fury was not even on Hiccup's top ten list of outlandish possibilities.

It had surprised him just how quickly they came to understand one another, though they were of vastly different species. It was a peculiar thing just how much Hiccup felt he could relate to the dragon—more than he ever could relate to his own people. Toothless was the first soul to accept him as he was—with all of the flaws and no expectations. There was friendship and a bond so real and unshakeable, it was as if Odin, himself, had forged it. Together they changed the course of history, turning three-hundred years of rigid Viking tradition on its head. No one would have dared to believe that Hiccup, the village's greatest regret, would become the Berk's greatest triumph, taking down the Red Death.

Fortunately, he always had an aptitude for the unexpected.

In a matter of days, almost everything Hiccup had known about life on Berk reversed, and he had been unconscious for the greater part of it. He was finally accepted—celebrated even. It had been an overwhelming whirlwind of the strikingly different, and Hiccup was not sure how to initially process it all, besides standing around dumbfounded.

His father actually looked at him with pride, not disappointment—something he had desperately wanted, but had to

flirt with death to obtain. It did not seem fair, but it was simply the way of things. Hiccup and his father were both headstrong and seldom admitted to the other when they had been wrong. Their odd new dynamic was as close to a genuine apology and reconciliation as Hiccup could hope to expect, so he made his peace with it.

He did have friends, though. Finally. Not to mention, more admirers than he cared to count. He was considered a source of inspiration and authority on all things dragon. His intelligence was finally recognized, and his Hiccup-ness, appreciated. If anyone had predicted that any of these things would one day come to pass, he might have laughed himself to tears.

Yet, there he was, a chief-in-training. He was expert dragon trainer, commanding respect and awe as he sailed through the skies on the back of his loyal Night Fury.

It seemed that Hiccup had actually weathered the storms of teenage angst and arrived to the sandy, sunny shores of maturity—but that was before he realized he had one more tempest left to navigate. It had been looming on the horizon for a few years, creeping ever closer with ominous black clouds and rolling thunder. Hiccup was not sure he would survive it—his emotional typhoon incarnate. It was hardly fair that with all his past struggles, his biggest challenge still lay ahead of him. Had he not already paid his dues tenfold? He was not sure he had the strength to deal with the wreckage of his heart against the rocks of her ambiguous feelings for him. For this storm took human form of a young Viking woman who was as fierce as she was beautiful. A walking enigma of feminine mystery that had stolen his heart years ago.

Hiccup, of course, was thinking about Astrid Hofferson.

There was a brief time, shortly after the defeat of the Red Death, when the transformation of Berk was still new and exciting, that Hiccup had dared to think that maybe he stood a chance with Astrid, too. After all, she had kissed him in front of everyone, and Hiccup had taken that as clear sign that they were a couple.

Supposed to be a couple.

Should have been a couple.

The way she had grabbed him then, crushing their lips together with an undeniable possessiveness—what other way was there to take it? Maybe, if it had been a one-time thing, Hiccup could have easily concluded that she was just happy he was alive—a sort of hero-worship thing. But their relationship—if it could even be called that—only seemed to progress from there.

Astrid had been his greatest supporter in founding the dragon training academy, and she was an integral part of helping defend Berk from Alvin the Treacherous and his Outcasts, as well as Dagur and his Berserkers. She and Hiccup had worked closely on integrating dragons into Hooligan life. True, the other teens helped, but Astrid was always coming to Hiccup directly with ideas, solutions, strategies, or just simply to talk about dragons. She sought his company far more than any of his other peers did, so he was under the impression they were only growing closer.

Then, of course, there were the kisses. He was as fond of the memories as he was tormented by them.

There never seemed to be any rhyme or reason to when and why Astrid kissed him. If she was playing games with him, then only she knew the rules. Her attraction to him was vague at best, so he did not push boundaries or question her motives. He was just pleased to be the bewildered recipient of a kiss whenever she felt generous to give one. They never defined the terms of their relationshipâ€”if they were just friends or something moreâ€”but Hiccup had always assumed there was no need to put a label on it. Everyone else already believed they were together, and Astrid never protested the assumption, though she never validated it, either. Hiccup went on blissfully believing he and Astrid had something a bit deeper than friendly races and a mutual interest in dragons.

They shared about a year of chaste kisses, warm smiles, and lingering glances, all without uttering heavy words like "boyfriend", "girlfriend", or "love." Then, with the turning of the seasons, Hiccup's happy illusion of shared affection slowly crumbled like a shoreline eroded by the raging sea of reality.

At sixteen, Astrid had finally matured enough that some of the other young men in their tribe had begun to notice her. It had taken her by surprise at first, because Astrid had never received any obvious advances from anyone other than Snotlout, Hiccup, and the occasional brave attempt by Tuffnut-Fishlegs never dared. Then, suddenly, she was being seen by older boys as the beautiful young maiden that Hiccup already knew her to be. They wanted her company, finding her combat skills and dragon-handling equally impressive. One young man, in particular, found any excuse to hover around Astrid, making as much of an effort to know her as he could. Behind his back, Snotlout and Tuffnut mocked Astrid's burly new suitor, but she did not seem as turned off by his increasing presence as the other riders did. On the contrary, she and this boy seemed to have a genuine rapportâ€”this young man appealing to the more aggressive, traditionally-inclined side of her.

Hiccup did not feel threatened right away, since he did not think Astrid was the kind of girl to buy into blatant flattery. She may have been older, but she was still Astridâ€”still the girl who laughed at his sarcastic wit, punched him for stupidity, and sporadically kissed him for his rectitude. In Hiccup's mind, he and Astrid had a solid thing between themâ€”as undefined as it was. He had no reason to fear others' available perception of Astridâ€”at least, not until she started to see herself that way. It was alarming when she began to look at her suitors in a new and intriguing light. It stung, because Hiccup had always thought what they had was steady and sure.

Apparently, Astrid had never felt the same.

The change in their friendship became noticeable thereafter. Their time together was filled less with talk of dragons, and more with talk of boys of whom Hiccup neither knew well, nor cared to know. Astrid never spoke of them in a giddy, love-struck sort of way. That was simply not her style, and Hiccup was thankful for it. He might have vomited. Instead, she spoke of various boys with a sense of admiration that she usually spared just for Hiccup and his accomplishments. Time did not diminish the twinge of irritation every

time Astrid mentioned another boy in that same manner. She spoke of their style and demeanor, and how appealing it was that they still kept their battle skills sharp, even in a time of peace. They were just so masculine, so Viking, so...everything that Hiccup was not, never was, nor would be. It was a slap in the face, and it spit on everything he had thought they had been to one another over the previous year. The jealousy began to well up inside of him to uncontrollable levels, and it formed a wedge between them that grew with each passing day.

Astrid became caught up in the allure of fitting in with an older, more mature crowd with similar interests other than dragons. She no longer sought Hiccup out with the same eagerness as before. Eventually, the gazes between them ceased to linger, the smiles started to lose their familiar warmth, and the already unpredictable current of kisses dried up altogether. She still attended dragon training, and she was still Hiccup's best flying partner, but it was obvious that whatever spark might have existed between them was snuffed out.

It seemed that Astrid was oblivious to the painful toll it was taking on Hiccup. She still called him her closest friend and confidant, which was rubbing salt into the festering emotional wound. He managed to keep their conversations light and friendly, even though he had stopped reciprocating when it came to confiding matters of the heart. She spoke and he listened, contributing nothing of equal depth.

No one had ever bothered to ask what exactly happened between them, but Hiccup was aware that the entire village knew that he and Astrid were not as close as they once had been. It was not customary for Vikings to have long, deep talks about their feelings outside close, intimate friendships. There was no punctuating a good cry by hugging it out with a neighbor or the odd fish monger. Hiccup enjoyed the respect for his privacy and the right to safeguard his feelings, but he noticed the stares as he walked by, and he noticed the low whispers that sounded suspiciously like his and Astrid's names.

The only person who attempted to breach the subject was his father, who was well meaning, but lacking sensitivity.

"Hiccup, a word?" Stoick asked one evening.

Hiccup had barely set foot in the house, and he was exhausted from a long day helping Gobber in the smithy. They had been working on bringing his design for multiple feeding stations to life, and it was a full-time job. Without sharing the bitter details of his anguish with his old mentor, Hiccup had attempted to hammer out his frustrations on every project that had crossed his workbench and his muscles were feeling it.

"Dad," Hiccup said wearily, "can't this wait until morning?"

He hoped avoiding his father's gaze as he made a beeline for the stairs would communicate to he was in no mood to talk.

"Son, Iâ€¦I know ye must have a lot on yer mindâ€¦" Stoick began, cautiously.

Meaningful conversations between them were still awkward, though they both did try. Occasionally.

"That's the understatement of the year," Hiccup muttered under his breath.

Between running the academy, caring for Toothless and Sharpshot, increased responsibilities as the chief's son, drafting up village improvements, and the oppressive weight of Astrid on his thoughts, he was shocked his brain had not yet burst from his skull.

Stoick just ignored his sarcastic comment and continued, "But I want to make sure ye haven't lost perspective. It is important, as the next chief of Berk, ye're able to maintain a level head no matter whatâ€¦personal issues ye're struggling with."

Hiccup knew, in Stoick's own way, that framing the conversation in the context of effective leadership was his way to ask, without asking, how Hiccup was handling the whole sad, pathetic situation with Astrid. It would have been a somewhat touching display of fatherly concern, if the hurt Hiccup was feeling was not so raw.

"I'm fine, Dad," Hiccup said firmly, leaving no doubt that this conversation was to go no further.

"Sonâ€¦"

Hiccup ducked around his father and climbed the stairs two at a time, shutting his bedroom door without another word.

Toothless, who had been dozing on his stone slab, opened his large eyes and raised his head curiously. Hiccup took a moment to greet his scaly companion before lying down on his bed, his eyes glued absentmindedly to the ceiling. There came a soft rumbling of sympathy from his dragon, and Hiccup raised his head to give Toothless a reassuring smile.

"I'm okay, bud."

Toothless narrowed his eyes a little, and Hiccup knew his dragon could see straight through him.

He hated being so transparent.

There came creaking on the stairs and the soft thud of footsteps. Hiccup sighed heavily, knowing that his dad was checking on him. There was a brief silence, during which he could picture his father standing outside his bedroom door, fist raised, wrestling with whether or not to knock.

After another brief moment of quiet, Stoick softly said, "There are plenty of other dragons to tame, son."

Hiccup groaned at his father's poor choice of an analogy and buried his face into his pillow. Stoick the Vast was not known for his eloquence, but he did tryâ€¦though, Hiccup sometimes wished he would not. He listened as his father's footsteps retreated downstairs, and though he would never admit it to the man, the small gesture of parental compassion had been a comfort in contrast to the whispers and pitying stares he normally received.

Hiccup willed himself not to think of Astrid as he tried to lull himself to sleep to the sound of Toothless' slow, deep breathingâ€”the dragon had already gone back to sleep. Naturally, the harder he tried to push thoughts of her out of his mind, the more permanently they lodged themselves there. He was in for another restless night, but as he tried to fend off images of her hair, her eyes, and her smile, he found new resolve.

He would no longer be an object of sympathy. If Astrid could move on without him, he would have to learn to move on without her. Hiccup was not a stranger to challenges. He met them, he overcame them, and Astrid Hofferson would be no different. So, he swore to himself that his father's attempt to discuss his relationship woes would be the first time, and the last.

* * *

><p>What's his name, again?" Snotlout asked, arms folded across his chest.<p>

He watched Astrid fly her dragon side-by-side with her favorite suitor-the most impressive specimen of them all, who hovered about her with an annoying persistence. It was Snotlout's favorite pastime to glare holes in the other man. There was a time when Hiccup might have joined him, but he was doing his best to be apathetic, patching the wound in his heart with a large piece of choosing-not-to-care.

Instead, his attention was on Hookfang, who looked a bit worn down and lethargic.

"Stefnir Svenson," Hiccup answered, determinedly keeping his eyes on the Book of Dragons. "His dad is tapped into the trade network. His family is pretty well off."

"How do you know that? We hardly talk to the guy," Snotlout remarked, frowning.

Hiccup glanced up from the page on Monstrous Nightmares, charcoal pencil in hand.

"I'm going to be the chief somedayâ€”a fact, I know, just thrills you," he replied, and Snotlout rolled his eyes. "It's my job to know these kind of things." He shut the book and patted Hookfang's snout, adding, "He has a cold, by the way. This isn't some new ability he's discovered."

The Monstrous Nightmare sneezed, sending scalding flecks of saliva through the air. Hiccup and Snotlout leapt aside as the oblivious Thorston Twins were showered with it.

"Agh,_ fuck!_" Tuffnut swore, desperately trying to wipe the burning sputum from his skin.

Ruffnut yelped and mimicked her brother while Snotlout snickered at their misfortune.

"Still, you have to admit it's kind of awesome," he said, stroking his dragon soothingly.

Hiccup shook his head and handed the book to Fishlegs, who tucked it into a satchel bag for safe keeping. At any given moment, as least one of them had the tome in his possession. It was not that the other teens never contributed knowledge to it, but Hiccup was afraid they would pass back the valuable book full of hastily scribbled messages like "Zipplebacks rule!" or "Astrid's Nadder can suck it!" It was best to not tempt them.

"I have to get back to the forge," Hiccup announced. "There's still two more feeding stations to build."

"Do you have to go?" Fishlegs asked, disappointed. He nodded at the other teens pointedly before whispering, "Don't leave me with them..."

Hiccup smiled, appreciating Fishlegs for the good friend that he was. They became closer as Astrid grew more distant, and it was nice to still have someone with whom he could relate. It was strange to find a Viking more sensitive than he was, but he could bounce ideas off of Fishlegs and expect a smart answer. Snotlout and the Twins left much to be desired in terms of satisfying conversation.

Admittedly, Fishlegs was not as easy on the eyes as Astrid was, but when it came to intellect, he and Hiccup were near equal. It would have made everything easier to completely disregard Astrid for the Ingerman boy's company, but in the sky, only Stormfly could compete with Toothless. Hiccup hated the part of himself that still took pleasure in racing the Deadly Nadder, and allowing himself to care for even a moment. Among the clouds, he let Astrid in—gave her a opening to move too close, again. In those short-lived bursts of happiness, he often forgot their problems. He continued to invite the friendly competition. If nothing else, he liked it when she chased him, for a change. Then reality caught up with them, and Astrid sped off to pursue the young men she had become so enamored with.

"They don't listen to me," Fishlegs said, eyeing the other teens warily as they roughhoused.

"What makes you think they listen to me?" Hiccup asked, quirking an eyebrow. "I just make suggestions in the hopes they're vaguely followed."

"At least your suggestions are heard. I think they might actually be deaf to my voice."

"You're the next best authority on dragons, Fishlegs. You're the only hope he's got," Hiccup stated dramatically, gesturing to the ill Monstrous Nightmare. "Do it for Hookfang."

Fishlegs stared back at him with a flat affect.

"You're surprisingly manipulative," he said.

Hiccup chuckled lightly—it was the greatest amount of mirth he could feel while he suppressed the rest of his feelings. Making himself vulnerable to one emotion opened the floodgates for others. Walking around partially numb was better than the steady onslaught of bitterness that accompanied thoughts of Astrid. On such a small island, she was not completely avoidable, but he tried to let go. He hoped repeatedly telling himself he did not give a damn would, one

day, make him believe it.

Fishlegs flashed him a slight grin, which quickly faltered with the flapping of dragon wings. The way his eyes darted between Hiccup and the individual behind him left no doubt who had just landed among them. Astrid had the habit of showing up right when Hiccup was trying to convince himself she did not matter anymore.

It was like she knew he was determined to get over her, but would not accept irrelevance. Even if it was in Hiccup's head, it was just so characteristic of her.

"Astrid!" Fishlegs exclaimed, a little too brightly to be genuine.

The other teens turned, interest piqued. It was always an event when Astrid decided to grace them with her presence.

Hiccup took a deep breath through his nose, imperceptible to everyone else. He wrestled with his gut reaction to hurt and lament. He did not care. He would not care. Astrid was not any more important than anyone else—"an internal mantra Hiccup would repeat until it stuck.

He glanced up at her, situation atop her Deadly Nadder. Dragon and rider were both beautiful and impressive, but that was old news that he tried to appreciate objectively. She did not seem the least bit excited to see him, so he did not acknowledge the small echo of excitement to see her. There was nothing more pathetic than one-sided pining.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Ruffnut teased—a quip that used to refer to Hiccup

"Stefnir's not my boyfriend," Astrid remarked, dismounting Stormfly with flourish

She moved fluidly with her piercing blue eyes settling on Hiccup. It was not the same as the coy little glances she used to give him. In his mind, it was predatory, and he looked away so Astrid did not sense his weakness and target him. For all her disinterest in what they were to each other, she certainly paid him more attention than he would have liked. It was uncomfortable, and Hiccup wondered if she was being intentionally cruel as someone's behest.

"Are we racing?" she asked. "You all were supposed to meet us on the beach."

"Oh, how_ could_ we have forgotten?" Snotlout replied sarcastically. "I can't believe we'd miss out on being the..." He tallied up the rest of them and added, "Fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and...ninth wheels."

"You are not," Astrid retorted, frowning. "We've always enjoyed the friendly competition."

"'We?' So, it is you and them...then the rest of us," Ruffnut said, folding her arms irritably.

"If there is a division, it's because you've made it," Astrid said,

narrowing her eyes. "I don't see why it has to be 'us', or 'them'."

"Because they are a pack of thick-headed Gronckle-fuckers," Snotlout responded, scowling.

Fishlegs shot him a dirty look at the insult. Snotlout was more vocal in his disapproval of the older boys, but Hiccup doubted his dismay cut too deeply, manifesting as nothing more serious than general indignation.

"And you wonder why I don't find you more appealing," Astrid replied, exasperated. She turned to Hiccup and smiled encouragingly. "At least I know at least one person who isn't a judgmental ass."

Hiccup wanted to laugh ruefully. Astrid had no idea the extent of his resentment.

"It's a waste of energy to blindly hate a person," he told her. "I usually need a reason."

He had many.

Astrid stepped toward him standing much too close than she shouldâ€"closer than she used to when their amiability was mutual. He could smell the scent of the soap she used and it filled his nostrils and burned his lungs with a sudden, unexpected rush of longing. So much for squashing down unwanted feelings. She was a temptress by the gods' design, and Hiccup was particularly susceptible to her brand of desirability.

"Stefnir keeps boasting he'll beat your Night Fury," Astrid told him, reaching up to bury his fingers in his hair, making the ache in his chest sharper. "I don't think he understands it doesn't matter how fast his dragon is. Toothless is not getting any slower."

She twisted a braid in place, even though he made a point to always undo the tiny auburn plaits shortly afterward. It was becoming much less common for them to cross paths, thanks to his efforts to avoid her. Astrid did not seem effected by it, though. She still found reasons to touch him. He wanted to scream for her to stopâ€"to keep her searing hands away from him, but that would be too obvious. As much as their growing distance hurt, he could not endure the added shame of admitting there was still one-sided attraction between them.

"He might learn something if you brought him around the academy," Hiccup said-it was an empty suggestion, but he knew Astrid would not follow through.

"He has a lot on his plate," was her excuse.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Flexing_ my_ muscles is an all-day thing," Tuffnut retorted and the other teens snickered.

Astrid dropped her hands to her sides with a heavy sigh. The constant taunting annoyed her, but she was never as defensive of the other boys as Hiccup expected her to be.

Once he was certain she was done touching him, he deftly undid the

braid she had just made. The disappointment on her face was clear, but she did not object.

"If the rest of you gave the guys a chance, I think you'd find there's plenty you have common," Astrid said, hand on her hips. "Instead, you all just want to be assholes."

"Somehow, I doubt there are enough similarities to carry us beyond small talk," Hiccup replied, brushing past her.

She seemed genuinely startled by his brusqueness—almost, a little let down. He did not understand why. It was not like she had much interest in his opinions.

"Where are you going?" she asked, sounding suddenly offended. "Hiccup, there's a race."

It was not fair. He did not understand what gave Astrid the right to both demand his presence when it suited her, and to push him away when it did not. People gave her too much—indulged her too much. He had been just as guilty of it, and perhaps he had given her the impression he did not have a will of his own outside what she wanted. He did not exist for her entertainment, as much as she seemed to think so.

He paused and glanced back at her.

"Looks like you'll have to get along with only four extra wheels," he retorted.

"Because your projects are just so damn important?" Astrid asked.

"Something like that."

"You're breaking my heart," she said, mockingly.

He stared at her, skeptically. She would have been more upset if she had misplaced her favorite battle-axe.

"Astrid," he replied flatly, "I sincerely doubt that."

* * *

><p>Rain pelted Berk with unrelenting fury. There was not a square inch of the village, indoors or out, that did not feel thoroughly soaked and drafty. Sometimes a blustery drizzle, but often a howling deluge, the weather was giving one last fight before the seasons changed. The fading days of late summer had already cooled considerably, heralding the oppressive reign of Berkian winters, and all the stubborn snow and ice to come. Besides being a welcome distraction, the smithy provided a constant warmth, and Hiccup sought to fill the daylight hours with projects and flights with Toothless—as soon as the weather permitted.<p>

Both he and the Night Fury were enjoying the heat of the forge, watching Gobber mull over the plans in his one, good hand. The rain hissed around the shop, loudly reminding them of its tireless downfall.

"Why do we need a dragon wash?" he asked, unconvinced. "Just stick 'em outside fer a few minutes!"

"Well, unless you actually like Grump's sâ€" "

"I am rather fond of his stench, actually," the older Viking interrupted, casting his sketches aside.

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow, doubtful, and Gobber just gazed back at him challengingly.

"I suppose yeh like saddlin' these ol' bones with more work, eh? It hasn't been but three months since we finished those feedin' stations, and yer already itchin' fer something else te busy yer hands with."

"Come on, Gobber. Have you ever known me to sit still?"

"Noâ€"but I've got a few ideas of ways a young lad, like yerself, could better occupy his time..."

"And that's where this conversation ends!" Hiccup exclaimed, grabbing his blacksmith's apron from its peg.

"All I'm sayin', Hiccup, is yer prospects are much better now. Perhaps it's time yeh found yerself a girlfriend," Gobber suggested, hobbling over to him. "Or, yeh know...a hand could do in a pinch."

"You've been talking to my dad again, haven't you?" Hiccup asked, accusingly. He tied the leather apron on a little too tight in his frustration.

"No...Well, yes._ Maybe_. His solutions are a little more practical, though. Datin' and marriage and all that business I've never had the itch te mess with," Gobber answered, waving his false hand dismissively. "Yer too high-strung lately. Yeh need te unwind. My solutions are a little more...immediate. Instantly satisfying, if yeh know what I mean."

"Why are you so concerned about how I spend my time?" Hiccup asked, frowning. He reached for a set of tongs. "And I am_ not_ high-strung."

"Hiccup?" came a familiar voiceâ€"one that he had come to dread.

He fumbled with the tongs in alarm, dropping them gracelessly.

"Oh, sure. Yer as calm as a snoozin' Hotburple," Gobber mocked.

Hiccup glared at his mentor as Astrid came bounding into the forge, drenched and breathless. Her tunic clung to her body more indecently than it really needed to, and the slight flushing of fair cheeks was not helping. He could pretend she no longer meant anything to him, but he could not pretend her physical beauty did not still fluster him. The moment he nearly forgot the pain of missing her, she traipsed by to remind him of what he nearly had, and what was also completely out of his reach. It did not matter how many times their interactions ended in shared resentment, Astrid inevitably came back

to further punish him for some unknown transgressionâ€”probably the mere fact that he existed. She seldom had any other reason.

"Oh, good. I'm glad you're here," she said, but Hiccup could not return the sentiment.

"I often am," he replied evenly, bending over to pick up his tongs.

She smiled, as oblivious to internal vexation as she ever was.

"I have a job for you, if you have the time," she said.

Of course she did. Besides dragon racing and blacksmithing, the last remaining vestiges of their friendship held little value. He was only useful to her in terms of his practical skillsâ€”things she could personally benefit from.

"I'm sorry, Astrid," he replied, hoping to deny her another opportunity to waste his time. "I have plenty of work to-"

"Eh, he's exaggeratin'!" Gobber scoffed, slapping his back jovially.

Hiccup sighed. His mentor could always be counted on for unnecessary meddling and poor timing.

"What is it that you need?" Hiccup asked her, reluctantly.

"A dagger," she answered. "Stefnir broke a blade practicing, and-"

"Those vile trees. We're so fortunate we have such brave men to defend us from their encroachment. Tell me, what is it like, to cull the timber herd?" he retorted sarcastically.

Astrid wrinkled her nose and swatted at him. He wished he did not find her facial expression so adorable. It made him want to keep speaking with her, even if it was unpleasant.

"He's not just throwing his daggers at treesâ€”though you wouldn't laugh if you saw how accurate he is. He almost always hits his mark," she remarked.

"Mn, yeah. He's amazing. I got that the last hundred times you mentioned him. I bet he's prepared nowâ€”to take on the entire forest single-handedly."

Astrid was used to his dry wit, and did not find hostility in it. She walked up to him, overlooking the way he recoiled from their close proximity. For whatever reason, lost on him, she gifted him with another braid. He tried, but failed, to hold back the shiver that coursed through him from the delightful sensation of her fingers in his hair.

"More like he defends Berk from raiders, Hiccup," she clarified, stepping back to admire her handiwork.

"We have our dragons to do that. Forgive me if I am less than impressed," he shot back, hastily twisting the braid loose when he

was sure she was watching.

She rolled her eyes and leaned against the wall patiently. He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Was there something else you needed?" he questioned, hesitant of providing another reason for her to linger.

"I'm not allowed to stand here?" she replied, curiously.

"Why would you want to?" he asked, bemused.

Astrid smiled at him in that way that tore at his heart's emotional scar tissue. It was suddenly more urgent that she left him alone.

"I've always liked watching you work," she answered, but he frowned, and she became defensive. She snapped, "Do you_ want_ me to go?"

He turned his back to her, grabbing a piece of iron ore with his tongs.

"I don't need the audience," he muttered.

He heard her storm off as he placed the raw material into the burning forge. It was strange to feel both relief and regret simultaneously, but with Astrid gone, he could actually focus on his work. If she had stayed, he would have used up his brainpower on remembering not to care.

Once she was out of earshot, Gobber spoke up.

"Yeh know, yeh might get her attention if yeh fought_ for_ her, not against her," the older Viking stated, shrugging his massive shoulders.

Hiccup compressed the bellows and replied, "I've done my share of fighting for people." He gestured down at his prosthetic leg and added, "It usually doesn't end well. I'm not looking to lose anymore pieces of myself."

2. Chapter 2

"It's _EinmÃ;nuÃ°ur_," Snotlout announced, to everyone's confusion.

He was prone to sudden outbursts. That was nothing new, but even his more asinine comments usually shared some connection to the overall conversation. Fishlegs glanced up at Snotlout, bemused, then looked to Hiccup for some kind of translation of his cousin's spontaneous musings.

Hiccup was just as clueless. He shrugged his shoulders before returning to their game of_ hnefatafl._

"What has that got to do with anything?" Fishlegs asked, fiddling with a discarded pawn in his thick hands.

"In case you haven't noticed, it's freezing balls outside," Snotlout

replied, as if it was the most obvious explanation.

"Just like it has been every winter for as long as Berk has stood here..." Hiccup muttered, moving one of his game pieces the number of spaces indicated on the dice he had rolled. "Also, long before that."

Snotlout ignored him and continued, "I, for one, am looking forward to summer in a few weeks."

"Praise the gods, you can read a calendar," Hiccup said sarcastically.

Snotlout scowled at him. "My point, asshole, is the first official dragon race of the summer season is almost here, and you are still down a teammate. This isn't friendly flying around the island anymore. This is fans shouting, sheep hunting, livestock dunking—for points! So far, it looks like it's going to be three-on-two, unless..."

Fishlegs froze, eyes flickering back and forth between Hiccup and Snotlout. He began anxiously twisting his hands around the captured black pawn he had been toying with.

"Fishlegs, he's dead," Hiccup said, nodding to the game piece the other boy was strangling. "Let him rest with dignity."

Fishlegs gave a nervous chuckle and dropped the pawn beside the hnefatafl board, drumming his fingers on the tabletop instead. Snotlout said nothing further, but Hiccup was keenly aware of his cousin's expectant stare boring into his side. Snotlout was waiting and hoping for some kind of negative response from him—a knee-jerk reaction of agony to his cousin's weighted implication. It must have provided Snotlout with some kind of outlet for his own frustrations every time he got to watch Hiccup squirm.

"I'm assuming you want to know what I plan on doing—if I'm going to bother asking Astrid or not," Hiccup replied to his cousin calmly.

"We don't need to have teams!" Fishlegs interjected quickly, hoping to cut whatever tension he perceived there to be. "We can race as individuals-!"

"It's fine. You and I have gone against Team Snotnuts before, without any trouble," Hiccup said.

"Huh? What about Snotnuts?" Tuffnut asked suddenly.

He and Ruffnut had been engaged in their own arm-wrestling competition, oblivious to a rest of the conversation taking place beside them. When Tuffnut perked up, his sister overpowered him, pinning his arm easily and spilling a tankard of ale onto the hnefatafl board. Hiccup, Fishlegs, and Snotlout, all pushed back from the table as the puddle of amber liquid dripped over the edge.

"Really, guys?" Fishlegs huffed at the unapologetic Thorston twins.

"I guess our match has been decided by a deluge of alcohol. I suppose it wouldn't be the first time stalwart Vikings have been defeated by drink," Hiccup remarked, picking up a wet pawn and examining its crudely carved face.

"Stop avoiding the issue!" Snotlout demanded, knocking the game piece from his hand.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes at his cousin.

"I'm not avoiding anything. All I'm saying is that Fishelgs and I don't need a third teammate to compete, but if you're so determined to keep the numbers even, you can go ask Astrid if she wants to race," he retorted. "It makes no difference to me, either way."

Snotlout eyed him challengingly, and Hiccup knew his cousin had no intention of approaching Astrid. He did not like being replaceable, especially by older boys who were more quintessentially Viking than he was. Snotlout's pride would not allow him to seem needy. He would not ask Astrid to return to their group. He only mentioned her hoping to see a crack in Hiccup's placid facade, but he had not yet been successful. No one had. Whatever outward frustration, confusion, and hurt had been evident when Astrid had first withdrawn, had receded into the deeper recesses of Hiccup's heart. Those feelings were successfully compartmentalized, hidden beneath a veil of numbness.

"I would think you'd care more," Snotlout muttered, folding his arms in front of his chest. "You two used to be a thing."

Hiccup stared at him sardonically and said, "We were never a thing. We were only ever friends."

It had burned when the realization had first dawned on him, but months later, it only filled him with bitterness and regret. He had been so foolish to think the occasional stolen kiss was tantamount to any real, significant feelings. Girls played by different rules. It was the ignorance of a boy in love, he supposed. He had been blinded by Astrid's geniality, mistaking it for caring after years of being ignored, hungry for acceptance and affection he had so long been denied. Whatever love he had for her then had since become inextricably entwined with resentment, and Hiccup could not determine which emotion was stronger.

"Well, none of us were that special, when you think about it," Ruffnut spoke up. She gestured across the Great Hall and added, "Look at her, sitting there like she's queen bee. It's like we never meant anything to her at all."

Astrid was with her new circle of friends, laughing as two of the young men fought each other. She cheered them on while they threw punches. By the smirks on their faces, it was all in good fun to work out some aggression, hone their skills, and to entertain. Older boys, like Stefnir, had been killing dragons a couple years before Hiccup and his friends had even been eligible to learn. Combat was what they knew, and though peace was upon their village, they needed an outlet. They were still warriors, and fist fights were an acceptable pastime. It was not uncommon, though Hiccup could not relate-but Astrid did. It was one of the factors that had driven her away, to young men that

better appreciated that part of her.

"Maybe we _should_ _ask_ Astrid if she wants to be in the race?" Fishlegs spoke up. "She's our friend, right? It's only fair to give her the opportunity."

"Friend? Is that what you'd call her?" Tuffnut replied, frowning. "I'd call her 'that girl who sometimes remembers we're alive.' If the occasional visit to the academy and friendly flight is what you'd call friendship, then I must not understand the word."

"That wouldn't be entirely surprising," Snotlout teased.

"I know. That what I meant. I really might _not_ understand the word," Tuffnut said, and he sounded sincere.

"Guys, I'm just trying to stop things from getting worse between us," Fishlegs stated.

He always tried to be the reasonable, sympathetic soul in the group, and Hiccup could appreciate that. Fishlegs and Astrid had a good rapport and so he remained neutral amid all the animosity the other teens directed her. Someone needed to hold middle ground, because Hiccup was too personally effected by the loss of Astrid's affection to pretend the others' insults bothered him. Objectively, Astrid did not deserve all the disdain. She had drifted away without intentionally being hurtful. It was her life, and she had every right to chose who played a prominent part in it.

But Hiccup's rational mind was just not speaking to his bruised heart, so objectivity was of no comfort.

"If she wants to spend more of her time with Stefnir and his friends, than that's her prerogative," he said. "You can't change her mind, Fishlegs."

"But we can keep reminding her we're here and we care," Fishlegs replied earnestly. "So, who's going to ask her?"

Snotlout shook his head and answered, "Care? You kind of have to give a shit for that to work. Unfortunately, I don't."

He began to walk off and the twins leapt to their feet.

"There's the pressing matter of getting more ale," Tuffnut said.

"Very important," Ruffnut added.

The two of them hurried off after Snotlout, retreating before they were recruited. Hiccup and Fishlegs were left sitting there, staring at each other, with a river of spilled alcohol and a soaked game board between them.

"I guess it'll have to be me then," Fishlegs said. "I'm not going to make you do it."

Hiccup sighed heavily and replied, "I don't know what you think you're saving me from."

"It can't be easy to see her with those other guys."

"What makes you say that?"

"Hiccup, come on...this is me you're talking to."

It was not impossible that Fishlegs could see through him. The other boy was also intelligent. In Astrid's absence, they were closer than they had ever been. Perhaps Fishlegs had learned to read him over the course of a year-or he was still a bit too transparent.

"So you've managed to dig past the surface and uncover some great inner turmoil, right?" Hiccup asked dryly.

"No, no. You're clearly above whatever this is, but I'm not as oblivious as Snotlout and the twins. I think you loved Astrid once, regardless of how you feel about her now," Fishlegs remarked. Gesturing vaguely at Hiccup's chest, he added, "Somehow, somewhere, that has got to hurt."

Hiccup was thankful he was still so opaque—"thankful that those closest to him could only speculate how miserable he felt.

"I don't think I ever loved her, but maybe I gave it my best shot?" he mused. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. There's nothing to be gained by talking about it."

Evade the issue. That was how he got by. He did not like to entertain conversation about his feelings longer than he had to. Ever since he had brushed off his father's attempt to coax something out of him, he had been determined to keep things buried. He said whatever he had to—"lied whatever lie it took to be left alone.

"You're right. Emotions-what a mess. It's kind of inappropriate to get into all of that," Fishlegs replied with a sheepish grin.

"Kind of."

"Too personal?"

Hiccup nodded. Openly expressing general unhappiness was one thing, but it was unbecoming for a Hooligan to dwell on matters of the heart. Such talk was reserved for close family or lovers, exclusively, but it did not prevent the unorthodox soul from being curious and asking what need not be asked—"nosy individuals, like Fishlegs and Gobber.

Most definitely, Gobber. Fishlegs, to a lesser extent.

"Sorry," Fishlegs apologized for his solecism. He rose to his feet and said, "I'll ask her, then—"to make it up to you. It's bound to be awkward, no matter who goes."

"If you insist," Hiccup replied, feigning indifference to mask his relief.

Fishlegs ambled away, and Hiccup watched him approach the pack of older teens. He stopped to make friendly conversation with Stefnir, who had an annoying habit of being far too interested in who spoke to Astrid. It seemed anyone with a penis was under particular scrutiny.

For all Astrid's denial that she and Stefnir were a legitimate couple, the young man displayed possessive tendencies that made Hiccup uneasy. Stefnir draped an arm around Astrid as Fishlegs chatted with them, even though there was hardly a Viking less threatening. Astrid seemed rather nonchalant as Stefnir pulled her closer.

>It made Hiccup's stomach clench with a sudden anger. He had to mentally slap himself to remember that he did not need Astrid's attentionâ€"or so he tried desperately to believe. He should not have been upset to see another young man touch her. He had no claim to her. If it was never going to be him, then inevitably someone else would earn that blessed privilege. There was nothing he could do but watch and accept reality. It should not have been such a hard thing to do. After all, he did not care. He told himself so assuredly. It was a senseless torture to want something so unobtainable. He wrestled back the unnecessary twinge of jealousy.<p>

Fishlegs had begun talking to Astrid, not doubt telling her about the upcoming official race to gauge her interest. She grinned and nodded, and Hiccup felt a sort of regrettable excitement. He was not so much looking forward to her presence, but the energy she brought to a dragon race, instead. She could stir up the crowd and race twice as hard as anyone. It was difficult not to find her enthusiasm infectious, though he hated the small part of himself that wanted her on his team. Honestly, he could have been just as content with only Fishlegs.

He sighed heavily and swiveled on the bench to stand, casting one more glance in Astrid's direction. It was a mistake. That moment, she had sought him out as well, and he felt a visceral dread as their eyes met. Her smile faded as she stared at him. It morphed into something unreadable that hovered in the realm of wistful contemplation. He did not know if she was expecting a friendly acknowledgment, like a nod of the head or a wave, but he could not uncurl his fists from where they rested, clenched in his lap. He did not know why her gaze lingered on him, or what possessed her to look for him, to begin with. It was the head games she played that threatened to rope him back in. Her mind-bending motivations were the reason he was so aloof around herâ€"why he resisted any conversation too friendly. He had crawled out from the chasm of woe, but one push from Astrid would send him back into it. His carefully maintained apathy was as much a defense mechanism as it was a salve for his heart's abrasion.

She had no right to look at him like thatâ€"like she had some great problem and he was her solution. It was as if she was compelled to make things needlessly complicated when they were quite simple. She had her boys. She had made her choice. There was no room for Hiccup in the equation but as a casual acquaintance. Why she occasionally acted differently was baffling, but Hiccup was tired of it. He did not want to play. There was no way for it to possibly end well. As she sat there, hoping for some amicable gesture aimed her way, he could only think of one action that was warranted.

He stood up and walked away, searching for a rag to mop up the puddle of ale that had drowned the _hnefatafl _board. He quickly reached back for his small braid, making sure it was in place so Astrid did not have an excuse to touch him if their paths soon crossed again. He had learned that begrudgingly leaving the decorations in his hair kept her busy fingers at bay. He did not glance back at her as he

weaved between tables, finding his current task more important than Astrid's reaction to his standoffishness.

Messes never did clean themselves.

* * *

><p>Astrid was restless. Just shy of eighteen, her life would soon be completely out of her handsâ€"she supposed it already was, to a degree. There were things still left to settleâ€"unresolved issues that weighed on her mind. She was afraid to move forward with loose ends.<p>

"Does Hiccup hate me, or what?" she asked, trying to sound relaxed for a very earnest question.

Ruffnut made an irritated noise and turned, clutching her saddle tightly.

"If you were around more, maybe you'd know," she replied.

The female Thorston was as bitter as the rest of her former group of friends, but at least the two of them were on speaking terms. Ruffnut resented the reduction in the amount of girl time and talk of young men, but they were still closer than Astrid was with any of the boys.

"I hung out with you last week. In the Great Hall, for the drinking contest between you and Snotlout? I held back your hair when you puked, remember?" Astrid retorted, rolling her eyes. "I _am _around..."

"Yeah, sure-for competitions and when you're bored because Stefnir's busy," Tuffnut said. fixing his saddle to Belch.

Astrid frowned, as she unburdened Stormfly from her leather gear. She had just returned from a solo flight, unable to find anyone to accompany her. The Thorston twins were prepared to fly only now that she was finished. She had, for a brief moment, spotted Hiccup and Toothless soaring among the clouds, but when she called out for them to let her catch up, she had lost sight of them immediately. She tried to tell herself that it had been unintentional-that they were not ignoring herâ€"but there had been something deliberate about their sharp turn. Her heart ached to watch him flee from her, but it was for the best-being around Hiccup was dangerous. He made her feel too much.

"How_ is _that going, anyway?" Ruffnut asked. "You've been with Stefnir for...what? Close to a year now?"

"Something like that," Astrid replied.

She did not know the exact length of time, because it had been an informal announcement unworthy of a commemorative date. For a whole year, she had denied she was dating anyone, but eventually, she could not fight it. It was too obvious and everyone would come to know, soon enough, how serious things with really were Stefnir Svenson. She had not been happy about becoming official, or whatever it was that labeled her unavailable, but she had let it slip in passing. Shrugging casually and failing to refute their boyfriend-girlfriend

status, Astrid had let the other riders know that Stefnir was there to stay. Fishlegs just nodded, unsurprised, and Snotlout huffed, folding his arms across his broad chest. Ruffnut fished around in her pocket for a piece of hack silver to pay her brother for whatever wager had been set between them. Hiccup had just...

Astrid sighed heavily, remembering the distinct lack of a response from him. He had barely even looked up from his sketches of Berk's new aqueduct system. It was a brief flicker of green in her direction with the tiniest skip of his pencil on the parchment in front of him. That was the only acknowledgment he gave. He had heard her, but could not care any less. It had been a painful dose of standoffishness.

She probably expected too much from him. They had been growing apart for the past two years, but there was no other way to make things work. She could not get to know Stefnir fall for him like she was supposed to with Hiccup drawing her in with his inescapable gravity.

She tried to ignore him properly, but she could not. There was nothing to be gained from braiding his hair or pestering him in the smithy, but she wanted to at least lay eyes on him. She wanted to touch him in some manner to ensure he was still real, and he had not faded from her life entirely.

Reason battled with compulsion. What she wanted, versus what she needed and both were embodied by two very different young men, and she could only have the one of them. She tried to let go of Hiccup, little by little, but the minute he had started to pull away of his own volition, she could not stop it. He was fading from her grasp faster and more completely than she had intended, and trying to maintain a friendship was like trying to keep water cupped in her hands. Her attempts to speak to him fell flat. She tried to rekindle some level of closeness, but it always backfired. He was a distant and unfamiliar heart wearing the kind face of her best friend.

Or rather, the boy who used to be her best friend.

Stormfly pulled her out of her reverie with a loud, excited squawk. Regardless of whatever tension existed between humans, dragons could still enjoy a good enough rapport with one another.

The Night Fury glided into the stables and Stormfly wanted to go to him her playmate but the intuitive dragons sensed their riders' hesitation and remained apart. Toothless warbled a greeting and Stormfly bobbed her head the most interaction they would allow themselves with Hiccup and Astrid present.

"Oh, look. Hiccup's back. Y'know, if you have any burning questions for him..." Ruffnut teased. Astrid shot her a dirty look and she cackled, mounting half of her Zippleback. "Don't forget, you and Stefnir agreed to do patrol for us tomorrow," the female Thorston added.

Astrid waved her hand dismissively and the twins took off, leaving her alone in the newly constructed subterranean stables with Hiccup and the faint odor of fresh paint wafting through the air. She almost wished they had not left her with the one person who least wanted to see her. Almost. There was something bittersweet about the particular

type of pain that came from interacting with him, and Astrid was feeling a little masochistic.

Hiccup did not look at her as he dismounted Toothless, but she stared at him and his windswept hair, which was far more attractive than it had any right to be. He had the audacity to grow more handsome from the moment she decided to give up on him. How thoughtless.

"I suppose you didn't hear me calling you earlier," she said, hands on her hips. Hiccup glanced at her, but only for a moment before casting his eyes to the ground.

"When was that?" he asked, flattening out his tousled hair.

"A little while ago, when you were flying. I was out on Stormfly. I tried to get your attention," she answered.

"Must've been too far away." He shrugged, and strode past her. His eyes were still determinedly avoiding her.

She dropped a hand down by her side, extending it just enough to barely brush Hiccup's fingers as he walked by. Attuned to subtle body movements from years of combat training, she noticed him tense, but he acted like he had not noticed the contact.

"Wait," Astrid said. She wanted to prolong things just a bit more. Their interactions were so few and far between.

Hiccup stopped, though he did not seem happy about it. She saw the rise and fall in his shoulders from the heavy sigh he kept as inaudible as possible. He could not pretend to be deaf to her then, and despite his aloof demeanor, he was also compelled to be polite. He turned, looking at her, and Astrid felt a twinge of sadness for the warmth missing from his eyes. It used to lift her spirits instantly, but there was nothing there for her anymore. He just stood there patiently, saying nothing and displaying no particular feeling at all.

"You're missing a braid," she said, running her fingers through his hair. He often had one, but it was not enough. She had recently taken to giving him two so she would not be deterred if he had kept one in place from the day before. She should not have been touching him. She did not need to be touching him-but it always felt good until the moment she stopped. Then she would feel ashamed.

"Oh. Well, by all means. I understand how vital that is to my appearance," he replied sarcastically, as she twisted his russet strands.

She grinned, but it quickly faded when she realized he was not smiling. Apparently, he had not meant to be funny, and was only tolerating her childish behavior because he was too kind. Never cruel in his apathy, but never giving her more cordial regard than she was due. It went against the expect that he treated Snotlout with a bit more consideration, if for no other reason than the two of them spent more time together.

"Done," she said, holding on to the tiny plait until there was no longer a sensible reason to do so. She let go of him with reluctance, but she honestly did not know what she was trying to hang on to, or

why. She had a man, and he was not Hiccup.

"Is that all?" he asked, neither rude nor impatient.

It was always the same question, sometimes reworded. "Is that all?" or "Is there anything else?" It was a narrow-ended question that contained his hope to leave. In two years, he had ended almost every conversation the same way.

"Yes," she answered, and he inclined his head respectfully.

He turned to his dragon, attitude brightening in an instant. It was not fair.

"Let's go, bud," he told the Night Fury. Toothless obediently trotted after him.

Stormfly fidgeted, wishing to follow them, and her pathetic cry captured the Night Fury's attention. He gazed back with rounded pupils and the softest growl. It was heartbreaking.

Hiccup paused and studied the dragons before his eyes met Astrid's again—one more time. It was not fair that their dragons' companionship had to be collateral damage in whatever it was they were doing to one another. She did not have a word to define it—"nothing that explained what existed between her and Hiccup anymore"—but maybe he did. She had to know.

"Did I do something to you. Do you...do you hate me?" she asked, steeling herself in anticipation of whatever terrible answer he might give. "Are you angry with me for dating Stefnir?"

Hiccup's eyebrows raised in surprise. He was truly taken aback, and it was the first clear emotion she had seen on his face in days.

"Hate you?" he replied. Then, he seemed to regain his composure, slipping back into that infuriatingly lukewarm demeanor. "No, Astrid. I don't hate you. Why would I? I would have to be personally offended you're dating Stefnir, and I'm not. After all, it's not like there's anything significant that was lost between us."

He might as well have slapped her for the effect his words had. To claim there had been nothing meaningful between them at all...

Astrid balled her hand into a fist.

Hiccup retreated up the stairs with his dragon, unconcerned with whatever her response might be. She was sure he was gone before she kicked over the nearest barrel in outrage. Dung-caked mucking tools clattered on to the ground with a jarring sound that bounced off the walls, scattering Terrible Terrors in a panic.

She was filled with so much hurt, confusion, and indignation, her body's only recourse was to shake from the flurry of emotion. Her fingers trembled badly as she stroked her concerned Nadder's snout, feeling her blood pressure drop a little with the soothing gesture. Her eyes stung and her throat felt dry, but Astrid Hofferson did not cry—"not for anyone who did not deserve it."

"Why couldn't you have just said 'yes'?" she muttered, to no one in particular.

* * *

><p>"You're upset," Stefnir announced, as if it was some kind of revelation.<p>

Astrid did not need the heads up. She was perfectly aware of how she felt. A full day had not been long enough to clear her head of Hiccup and his harsh words.

"It's nothing," she replied to avoid drudging up more negativity.

She wanted to shake off her discontent and focus on scouting the dark, swirling water below for signs of Maraudersâ€"assorted rabble from the remnants of the Berserkers and Outcasts. She and Stefnir were filling in for the Thorston twins, as promised. They could at least do a better job than the inattentive and easily distracted siblings.

"It's him again, isn't it?" Stefnir asked. Even the darkness, she could see his frown. It was highlighted by the luminous waxing moon above.

Astrid rolled her eyes. She did not like it when her own mind dwell on Hiccup. She did not need Stefnir to join in the misery and make it worse. It was counterproductive to moving on.

"Please, Stef. I want to drop it," she said firmly, pulling ahead of him as they rounded a sharp, craggy bend.

Patrolling the sea around Berk was a chore, but for their dragons, it was an excuse to stretch their wings. Stormfly flew smoothly, in good spirits.

"No. Evidently, this isn't getting any better. Whatever it is, I'm going to confront him about it. I don't care if he's the chief's son or not!"

Astrid eased up on Stormfly, and her dragon slowed until she was flying parallel to his tawny Monstrous Nightmare.

"No, you will not," she demanded and he quirked an eyebrow. "He's not doing anything deliberate. He's just..."

She did not know what to say. Plaguing her thoughts? Torturing her with his distance? The truth was problematic to her relationship. She had learned to like Stefnirâ€"really, she had. She no longer recoiled from his kisses, and she even initiated a peck or two so he believed her to be equally interested. Always quick and occasionally followed up by an embrace-never anything more serious from her. She had gotten to the point where she could accept his affections, but that was far easier than giving hers.

"Tell him about us, then. Tell all of them. Sever those ties for good," Stefnir said.

Astrid stomach knotted at the thought.

"I can't do that," she replied.

"Tell them? Or leave them behind?"

"Either? Both? Does it matter? They're my friends. They have been for a long timeâ€"well, most of them, anyway. I'm not just going to walk out of their lives because you think it's the right thing to do."

"Why not? You're halfway to it, from what I can tell. It would make things easier on everyone, especially once you told them the reason," Stefnir explained.

Astrid tilted her head back and closed her eyes, feeling her bangs and loose strands of hair whipping around her face as Stormfly glided over the rolling waves. She took a deep breath, feeling her hands tightening on the horn of her saddle, inhaling the salty air and warmth of the summer night.

"I'm not going to tell them we're engaged," she said softly. "Not yet. It's not a good time."

"For you, or for them?"

Astrid opened her eyes and glared at him.

"Againâ€"does it matter?" she retorted.

Stefnir's shoulders slumped in exasperation.

"Look, babe. I don't want to fight with you, but you're almost eighteen now. I'll be twenty-one. In a few months, my fifteen year old sister is marrying her fiance. We're overdue, considering how long the contract has been set between our families. Why are we delaying it? What are you waiting for?"

Astrid used to know the answer, back when she had hoped enough stalling would cause the Svenson clan to lose interest in a union with the Hoffersons-but wealth and power were the motivators, and not easily forgotten. She could not say she knew her reason any longer. Neither her parents, nor his, would bow out and disgrace their names. She was bound to Stefnir as long as the marriage contract stood. It had been a dreadful thought two years prior, when she had her sights set on Hiccup, but it had become painfully clear since that nothing would come of her one-sided longing. There was no use in prolonging the inevitable.

"If it gets you off my case, I will tell them tomorrow," she replied. "Gods only knows I couldn't bare the shame if your little sister got hitched before we do."

She forced a smile and Stefnir chuckled, satisfied. If she pretended to be cheerful long enough, she could start to believe she actually was, and they could finally drop the issue.

"Let's go back to the village," he said, grinning. "We can do another check at sunrise."

Astrid nodded and let him lead the way, trying to prepare herself to enjoy whatever method Stefnir would use to bid her a goodnight. He liked the physical, and she had thrown up boundaries he liked to push.

It was not that he was unattractive, or they did not get along. On the contrary, Astrid admired his combat skills and he was at least competent with a dragon. There was enough common ground to keep conversation from growing too dull, and he respected her. He cared for her and was sufficiently intelligent—but there was not a spark. At least, not for Astrid. She let him put his hands on her because it was all part of the act—a good wife-in-training. She could tolerate it, as every young woman who had survived an arranged marriage had to do. One day, she would hopefully wake up and love her husband, but it was not a sentiment she felt that night—not as they ushered their dragons into their adjacent stalls, and Stefnir grabbed her with that devious grin.

She let him kiss her as they had done dozens of times before. His lips were always greedy and his tongue was eager, but she stood there with her arms around his neck do nothing. Feeling nothing. She did not kiss him back and she did not push him away. She was simply compliant. It was never unpleasant, but she craved something different—a kind of kiss that her heart remembered vividly. She wanted the lips that felt and tasted more familiar, though she had not felt them in two years.

Her eyes fluttered closed and she slowly started to kiss Stefnir back, because she was imagining, for a moment, she was kissing someone else. In her mind, his lips were Hiccup's, and somehow that made it just a little bit better.

3. Chapter 3

Another month came and went. Astrid turned eighteen, and she still had not told the other riders of her arranged marriage to Stefnir. It would not change the truth, but her intended was pressuring her to be forthcoming for the wrong reasons, and so she was intentionally dragging her heels about it.

"It's part of growing up, Astrid. Sometimes, you have to let go of old friends in the interest of making new ones—moving on with your life," Stefnir said, and Astrid found his tone condescending. She did not need a lecture. The advice was unwarranted.

"So says the guy who's had the same friends since he was in diapers," she scoffed.

"Why are you so determined to hang on to them? Do you really think you'll be as involved with them and that academy nonsense once you have a baby in your arms?"

Stefnir was a more traditionally-minded Viking and he expected, with the announcement of their engagement and the nuptials to follow, that Astrid would retreat further into his ideals of a decent wife. He spoke a lot about home-cooked meals, many children, and the nights they would share. It was not that any of these things were inherently unappealing. Astrid wanted them, but she felt she was fulfilling a duty—an obligation, opposed to achieving these things of her own

will. Stefnir would be a good husbandâ€”Hel, a _great _husbandâ€”for a younger, more impressionable bride. Instead, he got Astridâ€”a fiancée that liked him as a person, but was indifferent to him as a future spouse and lover. She did not want to play the version of the happy wedded couple he had in his mind, so she delayed things further. She told him that she was not ready. She told their parents that she needed a bit more time, but she did not know much time would be enough. She did not know when she would feel ready to let go of her childhood friends and embrace the new social circle that would come with her new life as a Svenson.

She was not sure one could ever feel ready for that to be thrust upon themâ€”choosing between the comfort and carelessness of yesteryear and the uncertain changes awaiting in the fog of maturityâ€”but the alternative was to continue stringing everyone along through the thorny patch of misery laid out before them. She could not exactly call off the marriage. No one could make her say the vows, but she would not bring disgrace upon her family, either. She had a duty. A responsibility. She would be seen as unreasonable to throw a fit about it. Arranged marriages were not a novel idea, and she had no other attachments anyone knew about to hold her back and warrant such resistanceâ€”but it was nothing she had ever expected for herself, back when she had only been concerned with dragons and an infatuation with the chief's lanky son.

"You've been so anxious lately. I'm beginning to think you don't _want_ to marry me," Stefnir teased, though there was a trace of genuine concern hidden in his voice.

Astrid glanced down at him with an exasperated expression, making him chuckle. She did not want him to doubt her. They were going to be married, and she did not want suspicions hanging over them as they joined their lives together. The act of being wed was already heavy enough without threats of divorce and infidelity that accompanied insincere ties.

"Don't be ridiculous," she replied, running her fingers through his thick, fawn hair. "Of course I want to marry you. We'll be...very good together."

His helmet lay on the grass beside them as he rested with his head on her knee. His two closest friends were busy learning their families' trade-leather-working and carpentry, respectively. That left the Stefnir and Astrid to spend time alone, no distractions. It was always a bit forced and uncomfortable for Astrid, but such times of bonding and growth were necessary to convince herself she was deeply fond of the man she was to spend her life with.

>Then, she watched her fingers glide through his light brown locks, and she could not help but think of Hiccup's hair. That deep auburn that could look darker in shade, or brilliantly red when the light hit it just so.<p>

"That's always how you talk about us," Stefnir criticized. He sat up and her fingers were saddened by the loss of idle workâ€”she had been enjoying herself, imagining she was braiding Hiccup's hair. "It's always in terms of what a good pair we makeâ€”a formidable team. You rarely speak about us with any kind of affection."

Astrid pursed her lips. It was a fair assessment. Speaking about them in the most logical terms was easy. Lying that she felt any real

affection was the difficult part.

"What do you want me to say, Stef?" she asked. "Do you want a sweet pet name? Or do you want me hanging on your arm all of the time? I think we both know that's not meâ€"and you like that."

Stefnir frowned and touched her face. Astrid tensed, never feeling the urge to shove him away, but never feeling entirely comfortable with such tender contact.

"Tell me that you do love me," he demanded. "Tell me you aren't secretly dreading this."

Dread was a strong word, but so was love. Neither was true, in that particular instance.

"So, you plan on coercing me into affection?" she asked with a smirk.

Stefnir sighed heavily and gave the back of his neck a weary rub. He picked up his helmet and placed it on his head a bit forcefully. He winced.

"No, Astrid. I'm not trying to bully you. I hoped you'd say it of your free will, because you meant it."

She felt a stab of guilt. It was not her intention to hurt Stefnir, though she supposed it had to be her intention to mislead him. On some very fundamental level, she cared about him in a platonic, friendly manner. She did not like to lie, but their entire relationship was built on a substantial yarn that she had spunâ€"continued to spin.

"I...I do...I care about you. You know that," she remarked, and she was content it was a little honest, at least. She could not look him in the eyes, however.

He placed his fingertips beneath her chin and tilted her face toward him, forcing locked gazes that made her insides squirm nauseously. But they were to be married, and so she settled her stomach through sheer determination, like she always did. She told herself to enjoy itâ€"find something endearing in it. Stefnir studied her closely all the while, raking his eyes over her features with the intensity of a dragon stalking its next meal. The truth was his prey, hidden somewhere in the depths of Astrid's blue eyes. Her fingers curled in his tunic, tracing the lacings of his collar with a conscious softness, trying to act the part.

It was not a sincere moan against his lips when Stefnir kissed her possessively, but it was passable. His hand was on the small of her back, pulling her closer. She did not resist him, and perhaps it did feel kind of nice, but she could not say for sure. He pulled back, satisfied, but she knew it was only until the next time they had the same recurring argument.

"I love you," he said, rubbing his thumb lightly over her cheekbone as he cupped the side of her face.

She wanted to scream.

"I know that," she replied feebly.

She caught a glimpse a Night Fury gliding high overhead, and her heart gave the tiniest flutter of excitement. Then, she noticed the disappointment on her fiancé's face over her weak response, and her conscience kindly reminded her she was a horrible human being. There was no point in it—dragging Stefnir along as she entertained the faintest glimmer of hope that things might get better between her and Hiccup. Something had to give, and her arranged marriage was not going anywhere.

"I'll tell the others tomorrow—no, this time, I mean it," she resolved. "You'll have no more reason to doubt."

Her fiancé grinned, but she could not return it.

* * *

><p>"I don't suppose I'm allowed to ask yeh how things are comin' along in the datin' arena?" Gobber asked casually.<p>

He placed another finished saddle on the rack behind Hiccup.

"No. You're not," Hiccup answered flatly, tooling leather in a beautiful knotwork pattern on the saddle in front of him.

When the orders piled up, it was often a joint project to fill them, and he was the only person on the island who was as skilled and quick at leather-working as his mentor. Gobber was responsible for the base construction, according to the patron's specifications, and Hiccup provided the intricate finishing touches, be it decorations or additions of a more practical nature, such as mounts for weapons—essential to any design.

He was glad for the distraction, finding the smell of leather and soot from the forge comforting—until the older Viking had to open his mouth.

"Well, then here I am, _not_ _askin' yeh about it," Gobber remarked with a sly grin.

"That's great, because here I am, not telling you about it."

Gobber limped around until he was standing beside Hiccup, making himself difficult to ignore.

"Yeh know, yeh might want to take it easy on me. Show me mercy. Yer dad won't stop askin' because he knows yeh won't talk to him about anythin'," he said, leaning against Hiccup's workbench, weight on his remaining hand.

"And he thinks I talk to you?" Hiccup asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Aye, that's what he believes."

Hiccup groaned. He slumped his shoulders and laid down his leather tooling instruments in exasperation.

"Maybe about certain things, but my love life isn't one of them," he

said.

"Ahh, he's just concerned. Yeh know how he getsâ€"worried when yeh close yerself off. Worried that yer too distriacted thinkin' about Astâ€"other things, that yeh fail te tackle the problem right in front of yeh."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes. He heard the offending syllable that Gobber tried to gloss over.

"Oh. You mean problems like the ones he lays out right in front of me?" he asked, frowning.

He was getting tired of his father's constant nagging, hurriedly blurted out at him before he could retreat from the house. The past few moths had been filled with reminders that he needed more structured training in the ways of being chief. He kept brushing it off, however, not eager to spend his days shadowing his father. The added responsibility was just one more stress he did not need. Not to mention, he would likely lose his mind playing captive audience to all of his father's suggestions about dating.

He did not need the advice. He did not want the advice. What he really wanted, he could not have, and he had come to terms with that. A new, pretty face would not change anything.

"Yeh know that's not the way of it. Yeh do need te learn how te be chief, and part of that findin' yerself a wife. I think Stoick would feel much better if yeh were at least lookin' fer someone te fill that role..."

"I don't see the urgency. I don't intend on becoming chief anytime soon," Hiccup grumbled, returning to his work, hoping his renewed focus would discourage further conversation.

It was wishful thinking around a man like Gobber, with a penchant for talking that befitted his name.

"But yer eighteen, now," the older man stated.

"So are the othersâ€"or they're close enough to itâ€"but I don't hear anyone criticizing their lack of-"

"The war is overâ€" "

"Right. So, marriage isn't something to rush into anymore."

"It's about appearances, Hiccup. Yeh need te look like yer motivated."

"Clearly, you have been talking to my dad," Hiccup droned.

"Oh, it's not so bad. Yer bein' dramatic," Gobber replied, dismissively. "Yeh could probably choose any girl yeh like. Even if she wasn't happy about it, I can see the family refusin'-"

"Mmn, yeah. Nothing like a little bit of resentment to build the foundation of a lasting relationship," Hiccup muttered under his breath, but Gobber continued on, ignoring his sarcastic quip.

"Yer the future chief, the village heroâ€"

"Please, stop."

"Yeh have a _Night Fury!_ Yeh've got all the wealth and power that a young lady's family wouldâ€"

"_Stop,"_ Hiccup interrupted, firmly. "To me, this isn't some business deal to be struck."

Gobber sighed and gazed at him sympathetically, pushing back from the workbench. He smoothed his mustache with one hand, thoughtful.

"What about Ruffnut?" he asked, sincerely.

Hiccup's mallet completely missed the leather stamp. He stared back at Gobber incredulously, before his top lip curled at the thoughtâ€"not that he did not care about the female Thorston. As a friend. Only as a friendâ€"and even then, their relationship was an odd one.

"Alright,_ alright_," Gobber responded, throwing his hands up defensively. "I just thought maybe yeh could make that work-give it a shot. At least yeh are on good terms-that's half the battle isn't it?"

"Not exactly," Hiccup answered. He gestured vaguely below his waist and added, "Besides, the only way that works is I have a...and she...well, you get the point."

Gobber chuckled and ruffled his hair playfully. Hiccup set down his mallet to smooth it back out, though it always retained some degree of untidiness no matter what he did to it.

"Eh, I suppose yeh should take yer time. It's a lot te consider. Funny yeh should have te start all over now, considern' we all thought..."

Gobber trailed off suddenly, and when Hiccup glanced up, he noticed his mentor was staring out of the smithy window, lips in a tight, thin line. Something told him he should not lookâ€"he knew what he would seeâ€"but his interest was piqued. He turned hesitantly and was struck with a powerful surge of jealousy and anger as predictable as the annual dragon migration. He tried to wrestle it downâ€"tell himself there was no reason to care when Astrid hung on Stefnir's arm as they strolled by. He told himself he never had strong enough feelings for her, so it did not hurt when she smiled up at her boyfriend with simpering eyes. It was not a crimeâ€"Hiccup had to remind himselfâ€"that Astrid had not fallen in love with him, instead. He was being petty, he knew, when he had a passing fantasy of Stefnir struck down by lightning. He hated himself for going thereâ€"for allowing that moment of weakness. His heart trembled in resistance as he forced all of the negativity back into the depths of it, containing all of that pain behind his chains of apathy.

He may have had a lapse of emotional fortitude, but he had not reacted visibly. Gobber was still eyeing him as if he was anticipating a display of anguish, but he would not see it. Hiccup simply returned to work with a placid facade, though his hands shook as he held the leather stamp upright.

"I'm not sure why everyone was so convinced that Astrid and I would everâ€_damn it!_"

Hiccup had swung the mallet too forcefully and the stamp chewed a conspicuous divot in the leather. He dropped his tools and braced his irritable hands against the workbench, taking a deep, steadying breath. He closed his eyes and exhaled, willing his tense shoulders to relax.

Gobber patted him on the back and there was something infuriatingly _knowing _about the look he gave. Hiccup felt the stirrings of embarrassment.

"We'll just give the Eklunds a discount," Gobber said calmly, as if such blunders occurred every day.

Hiccup buried his face in his right hand, shaking his head.

"Yeh can also cover fer me tomorrow afternoon. I have te make a house call fer a Zippleback with a pretty nasty overbite. Then we can call it even."

Hiccup raised his other hand in halfhearted acknowledgment.

* * *

><p>It turned out to be such a nice summer day that Hiccup's mood sunk even lower as he paid his debt to Gobber in the stifling smithy. He spent as much time as he could lounging by the window between completing orders, occasionally catching a pleasant breeze. It should not have taken Gobber the duration of the afternoon for his dragon dentistry trade, but Hiccup suspected his mentor's absence was intentional. The older Viking had, no doubt, shirked his duties as blacksmith in the interest of giving Hiccup time and space to clear his head. It was effective, and Hiccup poured his energy into projects, but he envied the Hooligans enjoying the gorgeous weather on their dragons, soaring through the sky. He desperately wanted to be up there with them. As cathartic as working could be, nothing soothed mental disquiet like flying.<p>

Crisp blue gradually gave way to bands of vibrant orange and pink as the sun crept closer to the horizon. It would soon be dusk and he would have missed his entire afternoon and a good chunk of the early evening. Toothless would be anxious when he made it home, fidgeting impatiently and persistently until Hiccup's nerves grated too thin to deny the Night Fury any longer. He was exhaustedâ€physically, mentally, _emotionally_. The effort that went into determinedly not caring about much of anything was taxing to all aspects of his well being. He rubbed his eyes and yawned, expecting Gobber to return any minute and free him from his punishmentâ€but fate was never that kind.

"Hiccup!"

He would have wept with vexation if his spirits had the capacity have to sink any lower. He braced himself for the inevitable drain on the last flickers of energy he could afford to spare.

He glanced up to see Astrid running towards him battle-axe in

hand.

'Great,' he thought exasperatedly. '_Perfect_.' As if he really needed the extra work...

He eyed the axe in her hand and prayed to the Allfather she had brought him a task he could sufficiently occupy himself with as she prattled on about Stefnir, as she likely would. That way he could block her out, chiming in with "mhhh," and "yeah," wherever appropriate to give the impression that he was intently listening.

"I need it sharpened," Astrid said, holding out her axe. She nearly sounded apologetic.

"Again?" Hiccup mused, raising his eyebrows. "You must bring it in here at least every other week. Usually on the days that I'm here..."

"I know," Astrid sighed, "but the guys insist on a ridiculous amount of practice to keep their skills fresh. I just want the blade as sharp as possible, so I can keep up. A duller blade increases the effort and energy expenditure. You've always preached to me the merits of routine weapon maintenance."

"There's routine and then there's obsessive. I think you fall into the second category," he remarked. "You can over-sharpen it."

Astrid smiled ruefully and replied, "My axe is lighter. It's not as durable and it wears down faster."

She had to be joking. He was well acquainted with her battle-axe, being her personal blacksmith to his dismay. There was nothing flimsy about her weapon. He knew that for certain, having modified it before at her request. It held up better than most, especially if he worked on it.

"So, get a stronger axe?" he suggested.

She laughed, but it sounded forced, just like the majority of their communication. Her axe used to be her mother's, and Astrid was unusually sentimental about it. She swatted playfully at him with her free hand and teased, "Got any Gronkle iron just lying around? I may take you up on that."

"Yeah. Not happening," Hiccup said flatly.

"Well, then what are you going to do about this?" She asked, nodding down at the axe in her hand.

Reluctantly, he took it from her and examined the amount of wear and tear on the blade. There was next to none, and he was not at all surprised. She was wasting his time again for no other reason than she seemed to enjoy it. He was convinced of it, but did not have the slightest idea why she found their strained interactions entertaining.

His eyes and hands roamed over the axe in its entirety, just to be thorough. A part of him also hoped, if he stalled for a while, Gobber would return and he could pass the job along.

An awkward silence settled between him and Astrid, not that it was anything unusual. She rocked up onto her toes as she glanced around the shop she had visited dozens of times, pretending to be fascinated. She seemed more tense around him than he was used to, but he was not particularly interested in her troubles. He had not been for a while.

He decided he could not reasonably hold off any longer and resigned himself to fulfilling her request.

"Don't worry. I will have this back to you in no time," he said breaking the silence, taking the axe over to the grindstone.

Astrid followed him. She always stood too close as he workedâ€”not enough to endanger herself, but close enough to make his hair stand on end. It used to make him nervous, but he had become so familiar with the discomfort of her presence that he hardly noticed the way his body subconsciously tensed. It was a normal state of being whenever she was involved.

He ignored her and turned the crank handle vigorously until the stone gathered the proper momentum. Very carefully, he sharpened the first blade against it.

>He was keenly aware of the small steps Astrid was taking toward him. He had nearly sliced his fingers off the very first time she had come up behind him and buried her fingers in his hair while he worked the grindstone. That had been nearly two years ago, but he learned to anticipate the gentle tug on his russet locks, so he did not flinch when she started twisting the first of two identical braids.<p>

"You normally leave them in," Astrid commented softly. She was being slower than usual and Hiccup was frustrated with the lack of purpose to her movements. "I guess it's my lucky day."

He shrugged and flipped the axe over without a reply, for he was far too annoyed to say anything civil.

He turned the crank again before sharpening the other side, and Astrid begun working on the second braid at the same time. It was odd that her fingers glided despondently through his hair, but odder still was the way she stubbornly held the end of the braid between her fingers. Her hands had been known to linger more than they should, but she remained frozen while he finished her could not see her face-he did not dare glance back with a lethal weapon pressed against a spinning grindstoneâ€”but he could feel the trembling of her fingers against his scalp.

There was a part of himâ€”a very small fragmentâ€”that felt a twinge of concern laced with an unhealthy curiosity that would be best for him to ignore. He did not want to ask, because he could not let Astrid get to himâ€”open the door to his heart and make him care again. It would just inflict another deep wound like the ones he had endured at the beginningâ€”the ones that never quite healed. Then again, he _wanted _to ask, even if he would suffer for it later. In two years, it was as if she had been toying with him, never upset by their distanceâ€”but she was hurting then. It roused something in himâ€”something honorable that compelled him to want to be the shoulder she needed, even if it would never be reciprocated. He bit back the question, teetering on a knife's edge.

He was finished with the battle-axe, realizing he had been holding it idly in his lap while the grindstone continued to spin, slowing gradually.

"It's done," Hiccup announced. He straightened up quickly and Astrid released him, but she still had the fretful look in her eyes that made him uneasy.

Something was building—something significant that he could not name, but sensed hovering thickly in the air between them. It drew his consciousness like the undertow of a massive wave before it crashed into the unwitting shore. He could feel it—the impending blow after months of being steadily worn away by the ebb and flow of Astrid's peculiar affection for him. There was only one thing Hiccup could think of—one sensible thing—catastrophic enough to warrant such heaviness.

He knew what she wanted to say before the words even left her mouth.

"Stefnir and I are entering a marriage contract next month," she said, not nearly as delighted as he expected her to be. "I...Well, I just thought you should know..."

Hiccup's heart ceased to beat for what felt like an eternity. His grip tightened on her battle-axe and he felt a lump rising in his throat as he fought the urge to scream, swear, throw something—all seemed equally appealing. Her announcement was rather abrupt, and she was gazing at him intently, searching him for some kind, any kind, of reaction. But what could he say? That he protested? On what grounds? If there was one thing that could shatter all pretense of his indifference, it was marriage—specifically, Astrid's marriage. To anyone else.

It was unavailing to lose his control and chastise her for an engagement that was, in all actuality, unavoidable. It was the logical progression of things, considering how long she had been dating Stefnir Svenson. Still, while she simply had a boyfriend, Hiccup could deal with it—stoke the small flame of hope he regularly denied was there, in his heart. Even though Astrid had never shown any evidence that she planned to leave Stefnir, there was something less threatening about the word "boyfriend" when compared to "husband". Marriage seemed more permanent, and more insurmountable for their tepid relationship. Whatever Hiccup wanted to say or shout just then he knew would ultimately amount to nothing more than irritating old scars—ubbing them raw until they bled.

He thrust the axe back into her arms. With the greatest effort he managed an insincere smile and a simple, "Congratulations." It was expected. It was the right thing.

Astrid's expression hardened. Perhaps Hiccup was not as convincing as he had hoped?

"Yeah? You're actually happy for me?" She asked hesitantly.

"Of course!" Hiccup replied brightly. "Why wouldn't I be happy for you? That's...that's exciting."

Astrid's brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to reply, but suddenly thought better of it. She closed it again, examining her axe instead.

"How much do I owe you?" She asked quietly. "Hiccup had to lean in to hear her.

"Nothing. My gift to you is for the, uh, whole marriage thing."

"Thanks, Hiccup," she said in a reserved tone.

Hiccup did not understand it. There she was looking positively disheartened at the thought of marrying her paragon of Vikingness looking decidedly not Astrid. Had he said something to upset her? What could he have?

No. _

Hiccup was not going to let himself go down that path. He did not pretend to understand Astrid Hofferson's motivations, or her feelings. He was not going to let himself get sucked back in, to care. Her feelings, good or bad, were not his concern anymore. They no longer confided in each other. Those days of mutual vulnerability were long gone. Astrid was Svenson's problem. Hiccup just wanted her gone as soon as he could politely persuade her to leave.

"Have a good day, Astrid," he said brightly, with an underlying finality. "And I mean it, really. Congratulations."

Without another word he turned his back to her and pretended to busy himself with another project until she was well out of sight. She left quickly, much to his relief. When, and only when, he was sure she was gone, did he shakily let out the breath he was holding. He dropped to his knees, feeling like all the air had been stolen from his lungs "stolen from the whole world.

He had tried. Odin Allfather, how he had tried, for two long years. He finally had been winning, too "winning the unrelenting battle with his weak heart. Maybe, in another month or so, he could have started looking at other girls the way he used to look at Astrid?

On second thought, that was laughable.

The pain from their estrangement had never vanished, but like the dull aches where his flesh met his prosthetic, he had learned to live with it. Deal with it. Manage it. Then, out of nowhere, Astrid delivered a mortal blow like a lightning bolt from Thor, himself.

Hiccup's mind was reeling with a myriad of questions.

What right did she have to toy with him over and over again, whenever she needed amusement? Would her marriage make things better between them "finally severing the ties that kept them bound in misery? Or would she always kick him while he was down because she enjoyed his emotional struggle?

Suddenly, it was much too hot, and much too difficult to breathe. Hiccup gathered himself up from the ground and tore off his smithy's

apron like it was on fire. He knew he was under orders from Gobber to watch the shop in his absence, but he did not care. Berk would not fall to ruin because the forge closed for one evening. Hiccup, however, he might die if he did not escape.

He needed to be away from Berk. Away from everyone. Away from _her._

He ran into the village center, placing his fingers in his mouth and whistling for Toothless. Unlike people, his dragon did not disappoint him, and in an instant the Night Fury was by his side, bounding up from wherever he had been resting.

Hiccup effortlessly leapt into the saddle and locked his prosthetic foot into the tail fin mechanism.

"I need you to get me out of here, Toothless," he told the dragon, patting his thick, scaly neck. "As fast and as far as you can, bud."

Toothless did not know the circumstances, but he was clever enough to sense the urgency. He let out a small growl of acknowledgement as he stretched out his wings.

* * *

><p>Astrid paced alone in her room, wringing her hands as she worked up the nerve to fulfill her promise to Stefnir. She had to tell Hiccup and the other teens about her engagement, but how to find the right words when things were no longer as easygoing as they had once been? Several times, she nearly talked herself out of it, but there was only so long she could procrastinate. She felt that time was up long ago, and she had just been prolonging things for selfish reasonsâ€"for her comfort, only. There were no more satisfying excuses left.<p>

She debated telling Fishlegs first, gauging his reaction and moving on from there. The twins would be next, followed by Snotlout, whose reaction would be imbecilic, no doubt. Last, of course, would be Hiccup. Maybe by the time she spoke to him, she would be numb to any shock and indignation he might display?

Then, she realized she was being juvenile.

She shook her head and gave herself a gut check.

Cowardice would not help matters. She knew it would be best to tell Hiccup before anyone else, lest he hear it from another sourceâ€"get the most painful encounter over with, instead of walking around in nervous anticipation of it. She cracked her neck and shook her limbs and fingers loose, working out her jitters. She was stronger than the silly girl in fear of an old, inconsequential flame. Hiccup was no more terrifying than any other obstacle she had ever faced. In fact, with his aloof demeanor, what reason did she have to be nervous at all? He would likely take the news in stride...

She quickly silenced the voice telling her she would rather fight a Skrill than tell Hiccup she was to be married.

After two years, Astrid could not recall at what point he had turned

indifferent towards her. Perhaps it was a practice she should adopt? Hiccup did not seem to care anymore, so why should she? It was wasted effort. But, just when she was on the verge of letting him go, concentrating on her fiancé instead, he would catch her eye around Berk, or across the Great Hall during meals when she least expected it. He would always look away with a suddenness that tormented her mind.

Could he have feelings for her, still? Her heart fluttered at the thought, but then sharp reality cut back in. What difference would his feelings make? Neither one of them could undo the mess they were tangled in. Astrid could refuse to say the words "divorce Stefnir" shortly after they were wed...and bring undue disgrace on her family by a baseless dissolution of a marriage that was legitimate, and had not yet had the chance to thrive.

She could not do it. It simply was not in her. Her family name and pride was everything.

Siezing her axe, she bolted out of her house. She made a beeline for the smithy and hoped he was there "it was always a great place to start" knowing she had to tell Hiccup while she still had the courage to do so.

To her relief and distress, she found him filling in for Gobber and looking positively miserable about it. He glanced up as he saw her coming, the expression on his face was unreadable. Was he happy to see her? Was he annoyed? She could not tell anymore. He was such a stranger to her.

She attempted to make small talk, giving him some feeble excuse that her axe was dull and needed sharpening, again. It was a lie, of course, and she knew upon examining the blade that he would know it. But he did not press the issue. Hiccup never invited more conversation between them than he felt was necessary.

As he inspected her axe, undoubtedly realizing she was being foolish, her eyes scanned the rest of the shop. She fidgeted anxiously, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She could not look at his face while she built up the resolve to tell him of her engagement. There was something about him that was so disarming-something that made the prospect of telling him more upsetting than when she had just been pacing in her bedroom, thinking about it.

"Don't worry. I will have this back to you in no time," he said, breaking the awkward silence between them.

She followed as he approached the grindstone, turning the handle with a confidence of a skilled craftsman, well versed in weapon upkeep. His skill around the forge and all its parts never ceased to fascinate her. She watched with interest as he sharpened her axe, tiny sparks scattering from the wearing of metal against stone. He was not facing her, and that was best. She was not sure she would have been able to reach out and touch him otherwise. He did not jump or stiffen as she wove strands of his auburn hair into tiny plaits.

"You normally leave them in," Astrid commented softly. Her fingers were deliberately slow as she enjoyed the last opportunity she would have to put her hands on him, affectionately. "I guess it's my lucky

day."

Hiccup did not respond. He just continued to work diligently despite the absurdity of it.

Her heart was heavy as she played with his hair. In essence, she would be telling Hiccup goodbye—"slicing through whatever still existed between them with the sharp knife of matrimony. It was for the best, but she already felt an overwhelming sense of loss—for their friendship and for what might have become of them, if her arranged marriage was not so binding.

She paused after the second braid, toying with it appreciatively. Her heart would ache as soon as she released him, for that would be the beginning of the end of them. She began to shake, made anxious again by the enormity of removing Hiccup from her life—"well, as much as she could, and as much as there was still to lose. Tense, though their relationship was, there was an ardent need to be close to him. That was why she braided his hair—"sought him out. It was a craving of the soul that nothing, and no one else could satisfy.

"It's done," Hiccup announced.

He straightened up so suddenly his hair slipped between her fingers, and Astrid felt like a dry sob would not have been entirely inappropriate.

He turned and they stared at each other. Astrid felt her heart race from the way those viridescent eyes considered her with an echo of apprehension. She had to blurt out something, or she would stay rooted to the spot in an eternal limbo—"unable to completely hold them together, and not nearly strong enough to forever break them apart.

"Stefnir and I are entering a marriage contract next month," she said, and she could not muster the joy in her voice. "I...Well, I just thought you should know..."

She did not know what she had expected his reaction to be, and half of her anxiety was related to that uncertainty. Indignation and outrage was just as scathing as complete indifference, coming from Hiccup. She was prepared for either. She was not prepared, for him to completely embrace the idea.

>He shoved her axe back in her arms with excitement. He was grinning, and his eyes were alight with an enthusiasm she had not seen for two years.<p>

"Congratulations," he said, and it hurt.

Astrid swallowed hard, and narrowed her eyes.

"Yeah? You're actually—"happy for me?" she asked, not wanting to believe that after all of his standoffish behavior, he would come alive at the thought of her marrying another man.

"Of course!" Hiccup replied. "Why wouldn't I be happy for you? That's...that's exciting."

Astrid was profoundly bewildered, brow knitted as she consider his drastic mood swing. She tried to detect something else hidden there,

deep beneath the surface, but all she saw was a genuine happiness for her. She had dreaded throwing up one last barrier between them, but Hiccup seemed pleased. In all honesty, it was worse than anger or indifference. It was the final confirmation he did not care, and probably never didâ€”not to the extent she had once thought.

His question had likely been rhetorical, but she opened her mouth to say a number of thingsâ€”how he loved her somewhere deep down in that frozen heart of his, that it should be you and Stefnir, and that the whole damn situation was unfairâ€”but she bit held her tongue and said nothing. In that moment, she realized something, quite plainly...They were not Astrid and Hiccup, the two youths who tamed dragons together, defended Berk by day, and stole kisses. He was the chief's son and she was just another Hooligan girl. That was all they were to each other anymore.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked, feeling a sharp ache in her chest that seemed to burrowing into her whole being.

"Nothing. My gift to youâ€”for the, uh, whole marriageâ€”thing."

"Thanks, Hiccup," she said softly, and she was not able to look at that kind, delighted face.

"Have a good day, Astrid-and I mean it, really. Congratulations."

He turned away to some project in as clear a dismissal of her as he ever gave, unaware that Astrid's mind was a deafening tempest of sadness and fury. Her chest heaved and her fingers tightened around the handle of her battle-axe, hoping the weapon would leech away some of her despair. It was not his fault. She knew that. Her resentment was irrational. She knew that. Hiccup had only been supportive, something she had wanted from him for months, just not under the circumstances. It was selfish to want his affection on her terms, and she knew it, but it filled her with a clawing bitterness that she could only receive it over a marriage she did not want, after two years of hoping...

She turned on her heel and ran, wanting to put as much distance between herself and Hiccup's unintended cruelty. She rushed to the stables, to Stormfly, ignoring every wave or call that chased her from a friend or acquaintance.

Her Deadly Nadder perked up as she hurried down the stairs, nearly knocking Fishlegs off his feet. He flattened himself against the wall, as much as he could, with a startled gasp and she did not utter so much as an apologyâ€”she was not feeling particularly compassionate. She stormed into her dragon's stall, and though the Nadder was used to seeing her upset, Astrid had never flown her so inconsolable.

Astrid paced wildly for a moment, threading her fingers through her blonde hair, unconcerned with whether she pulled it loose from her neat braid. Then, making up her mind, she roughly pulled her saddle from the wall.

The Nadder eyed her warily.

"It's okay, girl," Astrid said, her breaking from tears she would not

shed. "We're going on a little trip. Just for a few hours. I just need to get away from Berk for a while. That doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

Stormfly considered Astrid for a moment before she determined her human needed an escape, in that uncanny way dragons just seemed to know things

4. Chapter 4

**A/N: **Ahhhhh. Back at it. Feels good. Yes, tortured Hiccstrid, give me all yo angst!

Get caught up here.

Are you people ready for this?

drops angst-bomb. Scurries away

* * *

><p>The sky was deep purple. A dusky blanket of faint stars that grew ever brighter with the sun's retreat. Clouds were dark, formless masses, looking ominous without their bright sunny linings. Instantly more threatening without those friendly, white faces.<p>

Everything was formidable in the dark.

Hiccup should have known that. He should have _known _that the burdensome hope lurking behind all his rationality was really his own stupidity, or that his caustic interactions with Astrid only hurt from a one-sided longing he thought he could disregard. That the trepidation he felt in her presence was the symptom of a nagging heartsickness he had no business feeling. After all, there was no chance-had never been a chance. She was going to marry Stefnir, and that was the end of it. Any further anguish he felt would be the persistent foolishness of a one-sided infatuation.

The whole pathetic situation was not nearly as complicated when the extent of Astrid's disinterest came to light. She had never been in the wrong, even maintaining their tense relationship-and why would she? It was platonic, sullied only by Hiccup's own selfish bitterness, suddenly thrown into relief with glaring clarity at the announcement of her engagement.

He growled, not sufficient enough to capture the scope of his frustration, more with himself than anything, or anyone else.

Toothless was flying along his own course, and Hiccup was merely passive. Angling his foot was second nature to him, performed almost involuntarily based of subtle cues from his dragon's shifting bulk. It freed his mind to wander, vulnerable to all the furious, self-disparaging thoughts ravaging his consciousness.

He pressed his palms to his eyes and breathed deeply. He was vaguely aware of the sea spray, prickling along his skin like icy needles, and the fluttering of his tunic circulating humid air over his body. They were the only distractions from the scathing shame he felt, that

oppressive disappointment in himself.

He uncovered his eyes, gazing out at the spreading dark of the evening. Time passed. Hiccup did not know how long.

"Toothless, where are we going?" he droned, clicking the Night Fury's tail fin into a new position when he felt the dragon begin to list.

Toothless warbled softly and Hiccup squinted in the waning light at a stretch of barren land distinguishable by the volcanic peak rising up from black sand. He had asked his Night Fury to take him far from Berk quick, fast, and in a hurry, but Dragon Island was not quite as far off the edge of the world as he had hoped. Still, it was uninhabited by man or dragon, haunted by the memory of the Red Death. While dead, her tyrannical presence could still be felt in the in the reigning silence and the island's perpetual gloom.

The beach rushed closer and a small readjustment in Toothless's tail fin saw them safely to it. Sand was never particularly kind to Hiccup's prosthesis, forcing him to frequently readjust his stance as the metal limb sank in the shifting grit. He would have chosen more solid ground, but Toothless gazed at him with rounded eyes and a soft growl seeking reassurance that his human counterpart was satisfied.

Hiccup's lips twitched, not a true smile, but sparing whatever shred of kindness he could for his best friend. He laid a hand on the dragon's scaly snout, and Toothless pressed into his touch. It was enough for the Night Fury.

>Gulls shrieked above them, barely visible. Toothless jerked his head, following their path with a curious snort.<p>

It was not fair for Hiccup to keep his dragon with him as he basked in his misery. Toothless was always sensitive to his moods. There was no reason for the dragon to keep him company through his petulant reverie. Hiccup could stand to mistreat himself, but not Toothless.

"Go on, bud." He gave the Night Fury a gentle pat. A gesture of dismissal.

>Toothless hesitated, barely turning away, warbling his reluctance. Hiccup nodded encouragingly, and his dragon lingered a moment longer before bounding off into the shadows, in search of whatever prey would best entertain him. With the Night Fury gone, Hiccup felt profoundly alone on that beach, but for once, that did not trouble him.<p>

He trudged through the sand to the water's edge, watching the waves rolling in by the rising moonlight gleaming off the crests. A briny wind combed through his hair and cut through his tunic, the moisture in the air making his skin feel unpleasantly clammy.

Sighing heavily, he sat down, just out of reach of the breaking surf. One knee bent, and the other leg folded beneath it, he leaned back on his hands, staring out into the dark expanse of the glittering sea, but focusing on nothing in particular. Images flashed in his mind more clearly than the world around him. Old memories of kisses and smiles, newer memories of cold stares and disappointed frowns. Colors and fragments of conversations past that, at the time, had been

all-consuming, but had ultimately amount to nothing. Sitting alone on Dragon Island, with only regret, was all he had to show for two years of pretending he was above everything-for failing to see the bigger picture beyond his own selfish concerns.

He had been punishing Astrid under the pretense of safeguarding his feelings. Reading too much in her attempts at lukewarm friendship. Expecting there was something deeper and intentionally hurtful there. Claiming he no longer cared when, in reality, his feelings for her ravaged his subconscious, tucked away in the back of his mind and making a mess of things. How he managed to fool himself into thinking he was over Astrid was a mystery. Bitter silence was not indifference, and the occasional stab of jealousy was not apathy. All of the times his anger flared at the sight of her with Stefnir, and all of the times her presence irked him, and he still continued to pretend she no longer mattered. That they no longer mattered-or rather, what they might have been no longer did.

No. Not might. Never were. Never would be.

Maybe she had a crush on him once. A girlish attraction to a boy who tamed wild dragons. Sure, he could see how that was appealing. It went no further, though. No more meaningful than what it was-the ebb and flow of adolescent hormones. She had grown older-both of them had-and she found something more satisfying in whatever her relationship with Stefnir offered. Hiccup could not be that, and he knew it. Holding it against Astrid was nothing more than deflecting his unhappiness on to her, throwing it back at the source. It was counterproductive to any sort of healing or reconciliation-a barrier to any civil interaction between them. For no other reason than Hiccup wanted what he could not have, unwilling to accept what was for the idea in his mind of what should be.

If he could take it back, he would have. He wanted to shake his younger self violently from the outset of everything. Shout at the heartsick boy to grow up and stop pining away for unrequited love. It held him back. Formed an even wider rift between him and Astrid that did not have to be so insurmountable. It brought a lot of unnecessary pain when he should have been focused on moving forward with his life. His father had more than implied it-a political marriage. Not an inherently despicable thing.

It made sense. For him, and for his people. That was the inevitable thing when no love was to be found on Berk. Astrid would be another man's wife. There were no other sensible prospects. He could do it. He would do it. In the morning, he would make peace with the reality he had been handed. He would mean it the next time he congratulated Astrid. Hel, congratulated Stefnir. He would go to his father and tell him to start working the diplomacy with other tribes. He would go on to take a strange bride from a strange tribe and provide Berk with an heir. He could learn to be pleased with it, too.

After he spent one last night lamenting everything.

* * *

><p>Stormfly landed gracefully, spraying only a little sand as her claws gripped the damp earth. Dragon Island was about as far from Berk as Astrid was willing to fly that night, remote enough to

privately shout all manner of swears at the gods, should she happen to feel so inclined. She slid out of her saddle, crouching low as her feet hit the beach. She straightened up with a shaky breath and a lump in her throat, swallowing hard like she might choke on a trapped scream.<p>

The stars twinkled above her, mockingly beautiful. Little viewing points for the gods to watch her struggle. "Damn you," she hissed through clenched teeth, feeling a stinging in her eyes unrelated to the salt in the air. She did not know what further damage there was to be done in her love life by spiting the gods.

She paced, lacing her fingers together and running them over her head with a weary exhale. She looked to her left at the colossal bones of the Red Death, like twisted, grotesque shadows to rudely remind her of a day she wanted to forget, when Hiccup nearly lost his life, but gained her fullest adoration. She should have told him then, how she felt. She should have told him so many, many things.

Her marriage was arranged. That was at the top of the list.

She had never wanted it, never asked for it. Her parents had sprung it on her one evening when she had come home from academy business. It was a deal struck before she could crawl. Before she showed she had any prowess in battle, that she could survive as a shield-maiden if need be, not beholden to any man for her welfare. A deal to better her family and protect their assets, uniting with another clan of repute seeking more influence on the chief's council. Strategic social advancement. That was what it was, for the Svensons. In return, Astrid would be cared and provided for, should her husband fall in battle with dragons or Berk's enemies. That was the rationale behind it, and all the arranged marriages at the time. They were meant to provide a young lady with means when war could take her husband early in life, but antiquated as soon as there was peace with dragons. The practice had quickly fallen out of favor before many youths their age could fall victim to it. Some families, however, still clung to old ways, be it for tradition or power-grabbing. Or, in the Hoffersons' case, because they felt honor-bound to uphold withstanding arrangements.

Astrid had been furious. She felt betrayed by her parents, making her into an object for barter. On top of all that, her mother had known, even if her father had been clueless, her attraction to Hiccup. She would have denied it then, if anyone asked her outright. It was a matter of pride to a foolish girl to whom being tough meant everything.

She did not feel tough any longer, made brittle under the weight of a false affection for her intended husband, and Hiccup's cool, distant demeanor. She could handle one or the other, but not both.

Perhaps it was what she deserved for her duplicity? For lying to Stefnir, to Hiccup, and to everyone. It would have been easier to tell the truth in the beginning, but her parents had made the finality of the deal abundantly clear. She had thought, at the time, the truth was too messy. Too many feelings that would lead to nowhere, if she was, indeed, bound to marry Stefnir. It had seemed less complicated to play along, since marriage was still a far-off, abstract concept to a fifteen-year-old. She would do what was expected of her, because that was who she was, what she did. Respect

her parents. Be the perfect daughter. It was natural, for a time.

Until her friendship with Hiccup dissolved. Then, everything was suddenly much harder than she anticipated, but the lie was already set. The longer it went on, the harder being honest became. The more damage it would do, and the more shame it would bring. It was not her way to disappoint and stir up trouble, so she kept pretending. Kept pulling Hiccup in only to push him away, and holding her future husband at a comfortable distance from her heart. Then everything was wrong, the facade she wore and the conflicting feelings for her best friend she could not kill.

Hiccup was always trying to simplify it by doing what she could not. He saw the futility in a continued friendship, so he drifted his separate way, and Astrid had grated on his kindness by holding on to him just tight enough until there was nothing left anymore. That was not Hiccup who had smiled and congratulated her in the smithy on her upcoming nuptials. She did not know who that young man was, even though she had been pestering him long enough.

She had come to Dragon Island to finally let go, painfully wrenching her delusions from her heart and setting them adrift in the tide. She had come to lay to rest the two carefree youths she had once known so well.

Stormfly growled anxiously, trudging through the sand to nudge her rider. Astrid turned, running her hand over her dragon's neck, before burying her face in those familiar scales.

"I'll be alright. At least I have you, Stormfly," she murmured, scrunching her eyes shut as they burned and blurred with tears she would not shed for pitying herself. Her lip trembled and she bit the inside to make it stop.

>She stood there, face pressed into her dragon as the sea tried to sing her its soothing melody. It barely helped, but it was better than lying curled up in her bed, staring out of her window at the chief's house as she reflected on everything, hating herself for it.<p>

It crossed her mind that her parents or Stefnir might wonder where she was, having flown off without a word to anyone, but it was a fleeting concern eclipsed by her own need to decompress. Still selfish, despite the misery it caused. She could have stayed there on that beach all night, everyone else be damned.

Her dragon, however, was not content to let her wallow in all of her unhappiness. Stormfly started to fidget, then squawk excitedly. She had discovered something more entertaining than her human's frustrations.

Astrid pushed back, staring at her dragon in confusion, but Stormfly was distracted. There was something moving toward them in darkness. Astrid could hear its heavy strides, but her dragon did not seem threatened by it. Instead, the Nadder took a few steps toward it, flapping her wings in a jubilant greeting. Astrid's fingers twitched for her axe, fastened to her dragon.

"Stormfly, what are you-?"

Eyes. Large, feral eyes stalked toward them, and a warble that made Astrid's heart flutter with an unexpected joy, before being cut by a nauseating realization. She saw the figure take on a dragon's shape, but she knew it was the Night Fury before he trotted up to them, spraying sand with his enthusiastic movements.

"Toothless," she breathed, and a thin veneer of sweat clung to her hairline and upper lip. The balmy air had less to do with it than the frantic hammering in her chest.

If the Night Fury was there, than Hiccup was as well. And that was terrifying.

>She reached out for Stormfly to flee home to Berk. It had been stupid to leave in the first place. Her impulsive quest for solitude had only brought her around Hiccup again. He was inescapable.<p>

Her hand rested on her saddle, curling in the weathered strap she often used to hoist herself up. She paused.

Hiccup_ was_ inescapable. Their village was not large, her weapon would need maintenance on occasion, their paths were bound to cross in the sky, and he was going to be the chief. She could not duck into buildings or whip around to avert her gaze in embarrassment. She refused to spend a lifetime of dodging and hiding, even if it would hurt. Nerves would eventually dull to pain.

Alone, on the island, away from prying eyes and eavesdroppers, Astrid could finally explain everything to him. She doubted it would change anything, but at least her conscience would be cleared, and she could lay their friendship to rest indefinitely, knowing there was no more left unsaid between them. She did not expect Hiccup to care, but she felt she owed it to him for who they used to be. Maybe then, she could finally get on with her life and her marriage, bringing closure to one, prolonged tragedy?

She patted Toothless and the dragon crooned, always glad to see her when his rider was not.

"Where's Hiccup?" she asked. "Take me to him?"

Toothless cocked his head, perking up as he processed her request. She climbed on Stormfly's back, but the Night Fury did not keep her waiting. He raced off into the shadows, and Astrid did not need to urge her dragon forward. Stormfly was already flying after him.

* * *

><p>Hiccup stood slowly, brushing the sand from his hands. He his lips were only barely parted in surprise, but it was fitting response. Astrid was the very last person he expected to see-wanted to see. His shock was rapidly becoming angry disbelief. Even when he had been prepared to give up, she had that unnatural ability to find him, just to make things more difficult than they already were. It was as if she existed to do nothing else, but he knew she was not to blame for any of it, really. Coincidence had likely brought her there, but it did nothing to diminish his vexation. He could shout or curse from the overwhelming injustice.<p>

She dismounted Stormfly, but she did not come toward him. Instead, she stared at him warily as if she could sense the raging bitter

storm underneath his even exterior. There was only a short stretch of beach between them, but it felt far too close, yet a world apart as they gazed at each other, their thoughts no longer mutually discernible as they had been two years before.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, wanting to convey his indignation, but there was nothing left in him. No energy to give that deeply stewing negativity life. He only sounded exasperated. Mildly annoyed and emotionally spent.

Astrid floundered for a moment, mouthing wordlessly. It was a simple question requiring no elaborate answer, and yet she seemed at a loss. Skittish, even. More so than he had ever seen her.

"Hiccup, I know you don't really want to see me." She started to approach him and he took a couple of steps back.

An understatement, if he had ever heard one.

"I don't know why you would think that." Sarcasm would be his shield. "I regularly come to deserted islands for the company." The rolling waves lapped at him, but Astrid kept advancing.

"I didn't know you'd be here, obviously." Silver moonbeams flashed off the studs of her headband and rested luminously in her hair, brilliant in a way Hiccup wished he had not noticed.

"Obviously. As in, you didn't follow me here after I left the forge?"

Astrid's brow furrowed. "Why would I follow you? I thought you were still back there, working on some new project or whatever task Gobber set for you."

"I see. So, you wanted to be alone. I'd be delighted to help you with that." Hiccup turned his eyes on Toothless, gesturing for the dragon to come to him, but the Night Fury only balked and growled an apology. Hiccup was taken aback.

"Don't leave! Now that you're here I...I want to talk to you. To explain. It's kind of important."

"Explain to me why you're marrying your boyfriend of the past two years?" His voice was too flat, even for him. "I think I can figure that one on my own, Astrid."

"There's a lot more to it than that."

Hiccup set his jaw, brushing past her. They had already exchanged enough words in the smithy. He made a beeline for Toothless, no nearer to making peace with reality if he lingered with Astrid.

"I'm not much of the type for planning weddings, if that's what you're getting at."

"No, I—"

"And I'm too busy with work to craft your wedding bands." It was a lie, but he needed an excuse to avoid her in the coming weeks. Astrid did not know it, but it would be better for both of them in the

long run, so he climbed into his saddle. Toothless crouched with a plaintive warble and wide eyes, but he could be comforted later when Hiccup was calm enough to soothe and explain like the dragon might understand. "Gobber would be a better choice."

"Hiccup, don't." There was something in her voice, but he probably imagined it. Astrid Hofferson did not plead.

"You'll have a lovely wedding, I'm sure of it." He hinged his prosthesis to Toothless's. He ignored his dragon's protests. "Half a week-long celebration, at least. Berk will be just _thrilled._"

"Hiccup-"

"There will be more offers to help than you know what to do with. Why would you even need my help?"

"That's not-"

He was being petty again. Facetious. Hurting like he was entitled, but she could not have known that. He sometimes forgot that all of his inner anguish, while thinly veiled, was largely ambiguous to everyone else though he felt it so potently. To Astrid, his brusqueness was probably unwarranted. Continuing to treat her abrasively was counterproductive to all the resolutions he had made on that beach.

He breathed deeply, forcing the most insincere benignity in hope he could make them both believe it.

He opened Toothless's tail fin, preparing to fly off and put an end to the disaster that was the last few shards of their strained relationship. "It's exciting, though. Really. I'm very happy for-"

"Gods damn it, Hiccup! It's _arranged!_" Astrid blurted out, digging her fingers in his sleeve to wrest his attention to her. "The whole marriage! I never wanted this!"

Her outburst left a ringing silence in its wake, save for the squawking of gulls and the eternal rush of the sea. Hiccup was vaguely aware of his own tremulous breathing.

* * *

><p>Astrid's face was burning, and she was actually glad for the lack of daylight to hide the rosy curse of a fair complexion. She slowly released her grip on Hiccup. He was sitting astride Toothless, but he was just staring at her. He did not say anything and the expression on his face was unusual. She did not know what to call it. He looked surprised, but also irritated. His eyebrows wavered somewhere between the two. There was a faint curl to his lip, though she did not know if it was disgust or disbelief.<p>

"What do you mean 'it's arranged'?" he asked. He rolled his shoulders back so he was sitting rigidly straight.

She cleared her throat softly, hands on her hips. She wanted to regain some composure, to feel like she had some measure of control

to such a long awaited conversation. "I would think, Hiccup, you're smart enough to know what that means."

He sat, poised on his dragon, for another moment, considering her with an intensity that Astrid had not seen in him for a while. He fuming, breathing deeply with a clenched jaw. His eyes narrowed at her, and Astrid felt it was an eternity under his scrutiny.

Finally, his face softened, but not anywhere near the point of friendliness. Then, he dismounted Toothless, but held fast to his saddle. He was not looking at her then, eyes fixed to the sand pensively. She wish she could decipher it, whenever he thought that loud. His mind shouted out words at her, but her ears were not tuned to hear them.

"You're not marrying Stefnir because you love him." A conclusion. Not a question.

"Does it matter, Hiccup?"

He hesitated, weighing his answer.

"No. It doesn't," was the reply he gave, but not the one Astrid suspected he truly wanted to say. He had not expressed any strong opinion on the truth, one way or the other, but he was speaking to her. His feet were firmly planted on the ground. He was not trying to run. He was engaged, for once.

"I don't want to talk about whatever feelings I may or may not have for Stef, okay?"

"_Stef?_ Adorable. Did he come up with that one? Points for originality."

"Hiccup..." Astrid was exasperated, dropping her arms to her sides.

He was being unusually snippy, and she could not begin to imagine why. He had no interest in her romantically. That was plain. It did not make sense to her why knowing she had no control over her fate was somehow aggravating to Hiccup.

"If you don't want to talk about him, what is the point of bringing up your impending marriage at all? Why bother telling me it's arranged?" he scowled. "What does it accomplish?" There was something blazing in his eyes. Even in the dark, she could see it.

"Because I'm hoping it'll change things.

"As far as I know, you're still going to marry him."

"Yes. But that's not the point."

"Then nothing's changed. You and he are-"

"No. Change things...between _us_, Hiccup." She gestured pointedly.

"Us?"

Astrid nodded. Just getting that far had been exhausting.

Hiccup withdrew his hand from his saddle and turned toward her fully. "What is 'us', Astrid? What is there to change?"

"All of it. Hiccup, we've lost something. I want to get it back, if that's even possible."

He moved toward her, closing the distance between them.

"I've spent two years trying to convince myself that all of those kisses and flirting didn't mean anything. You're trying to tell me now that they did, once?"

"They still mean something."

Hiccup actually laughed, but it was derisive. "Does Stefnir know that?"

"No. He thinks you're little more than a friend to me now."

"Not even that, Astrid."

He turned back for his dragon but she lunged forward, seizing him by the shoulder and spinning him around. The floodgates had opened, and she was not going to leave things there. Reconciliation or not, there would be an end to all of it, right there on that beach.

"You've never been cruel. You said you don't hate me. You...congratulate me on my engagement. Then you're so distant. You won't talk to me for more than a few minutes. You avoid me. Hiccup, I could freeze to death from that icy wind blowing off your cold shoulder!"

"You have Stefnir to keep you warm. You're not marrying for love, but you care for him. What, then, could you possibly want from me? You made it clear two years ago that you'd be just fine without me around, and now you're trying to tell me you're not? So all of the toying with me you've done has been to get back in my good graces? I guess it must really be miserable for you to have only one guy to jerk around."

"_Don't _presume you know how I feel. I was trying to salvage something you apparently lost interest in. Come to find out, you've been stewing in bitterness the whole time! We can put a patch on things, Hiccup. I'm sorry it's taken this long. I should have told you the truth two years ago. I never told you I had to marry Stefnir because I was trying to save you the disappointment."

"Right. Replace it with a different kind. Makes sense," he said sarcastically.

Astrid's mind was reeling. She was so livid with his flippant comments, and hurt by his persisting disdain, knowing the whole two years she had thought he simply did not care, he was inwardly seething. It was much worse, and they were at a crossroads. The way back was blocked by their candor and stupidity, but the two roads ahead diverged. One path, they parted ways completely, the other, a fragile friendship always undermined by the truth that they could have been something, if only given the opportunity. Both roads were

unsatisfying in their own right, and Astrid frantically scanned the horizon of her heart for a third option.

"If you can look me in the eye, right now, and tell me that you hate me. If you can honestly say you're not interested in any kind of...friendship between us anymore...then I'll leave you alone. I'll go on to marry Stefnir, and you can go on holding your grudge and marry...some daughter of another chieftain, I suppose. We'll coexist in our miserable, parallel lives-but you have to look at me now and _mean _it!"

She was trembling, leaning in and rising on her toes to make herself taller as she delivered her challenge. Hiccup was gazing down at her, folding his arms across his chest. He did not answer her, but he was aggressively thinking again. She could see it in his eyes as they stood so close. He was no longer frustrated. He appeared more dumbfounded than anything else, almost in a scramble. If he was so resolute-so determined to cast her aside-the answer should have been immediate, but he stalled.

"I'm not interested in just a friendship with you, Astrid." There was sincerity in his voice. He had meant what he said, but his eyes were filled with regret as the words left his mouth.

He was not interested in friendship. He was genuine about that, but so were his eyes telling her there was a follow up to that statement. An implied "but" he would not speak. It was there nevertheless, in the utterance of "just".

Astrid had found the third option. The hidden road.

"Good," she replied. "Neither am I."

She seized him by the silk samite-trimmed collar of his tunic and pulled him down the short distance for a forcefully desperate kiss.

5. Chapter 5

****A/N:**** I want to thank everyone for the positive reviews! I have read them, but I've been so busy and scatterbrained lately, I just haven't made the time to reply like I should. Sorry about that. Please accept this rather pitiful attempt at a public thank you, instead! :)

Also, I will continue to shamelessly promote my Tumblr blog. If you like my writing, not to mention the HTTYD fandom in general, it is an awesome site full of talent. I am very active on it, posting a multitude of Hiccstrid writing that I have not published on this website. I also make updates to this fic much earlier on Tumblr. Come check it out. :)

* * *

><p>Deafeningly loud and oppressively silent.<p>

Hiccup's mind was reeling, both a roiling mass of thoughts and an eerily still well of shock and disbelief. His fingers trembled with both joy and fury, gripping Astrid's arms loosely, indecisive whether

to push her away or draw her closer.

Her lips were agony pressed against his. Soft petals that tasted sweet, but imbued with a venom to kill the last vestiges of his common sense and reason. He had wanted to taste her kiss again-_craved_ it ardently for far too long-and as an unspoken and desperate hope was finally realized, the bile rose in his throat. It bubbled up from the pit of his stomach as a sickening reminder of how inherently wrong it was.

A nauseous rage rippled through him, and the pads of his fingers pressed into her skin with a bruising force. He tore her away from him with a gasp of relief and guilty disappointment. He could breathe again, and he hated that, only despising himself more for resenting the parting of their lips.

"No." He muttered with furrowed brow, gazing at their feet. Three boots and one prosthesis, caked with black sand. "No," he repeated firmer. Louder. Trying to convince both of them he did not want it. Or, at the very least, did not _want_ to want it.

Astrid tried to reach for him, to touch his face in a tender gesture that might actually shatter him. "Hiccup-

"No!" He jerked away, scowling and the proud and fierce Astrid Hofferson balked. Anger was swelling inside him, feeding off the renewed energy of suppressed heartache finally working its way to the surface, two years too late. "You don't get to do that! Act, now, like you care!" He was brandishing his finger accusingly, talking wildly with his hands.

Astrid reached up to stroke the end of her braid, a mindless habit whenever she was anxious. Something Hiccup never should have bothered to notice. "I never stopped caring," she replied evenly. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. That's why this hurts."

Hiccup could not imagine she understood the extent of the pain she had inflicted on him-was continuing to inflict right there, on that beach. How laughable it was, then, that she claimed to be suffering.

He scoffed, squaring his jaw. "Then, why now? Why here, when there is nothing either of us can do to fix it? You're going to marry Stefnir, so what is it about stringing me along that is so damn appealing to you?"

Astrid frowned, and it was a defensive bowing of her lips. There was blame in her eyes, concentrated and directed at him as if he was the cause of everything. "I can't seem to get over you. That's my problem-mine as much as it is yours."

Victim and perpetrator. She wanted to be both.

"Obviously it's _my_ problem," sarcasm ripped from him, even then, "since I can't ever seem to get away from you!" He was done with all of it. Prepared to let old, familiar wounds fester instead of tearing open new ones. Astrid wanted some kind of emotional salve, but there was nothing that could be smoothed over the bleeding, putrid sore that was them. "I've tried, then you kept coming around and making it impossible for me to get passed this-us. Whatever the Hel we used to

be! I'm tired, Astrid. Tired of not being anything more than your source of twisted entertainment!"

Astrid was indignant. Good. Perhaps she might storm off and leave him to go back to accepting that they were in shambles? Broken and beyond any futile attempts at repair.

"Is that what you really think I was doing?" she asked, teeth bared and eyes alight with equal outrage. Maybe she would finally meet him on his level.

"Am I wrong?" he asked.

"I don't get any pleasure from this! Don't you think I would've stopped it if I could? But it's you-everything that is so infuriatingly _you!_"

He did not know why they continued to shout and insult when it would accomplish nothing. Before the lingering ghosts of old, mutual attraction had come to light, there was nothing to debate, nothing to lament-at least, not together. Their misery was their own, and there was nothing to be gained between them. It would have been better to remain ignorant. There were no prizes to be awarded for their candor.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Let me be someone else to make_ your_ life simpler!" Hiccup threw his hand around haphazardly. Somehow, his pointless flailing was cathartic. A physical representation of his ire.

"I don't _want _you to be anyone else, Hiccup! I just want..." Astrid smoothed her hands over her hair, glancing toward the night sky.

"What? Want w_hat?_ Me to be content with being your man on the side? To act like the past two years didn't happen?"

Astrid stared at him, gaze unwavering as it bored into him with its disarming significance. "You. I want you." Her voice was exhausted, barely above a whisper. Defeated and vulnerable in a way Hiccup was not prepared to handle when accompanied by those words. "I want you to myself, and I want you to come alive again, liked you used to be. I want _you_, Hiccup, not Stefnir."

It was enough to make abundantly clear how much of his anger was a facade. How badly he was lying to himself because he could not trust his own feelings unchecked. A defense mechanism barely containing two years of anguish that was seemingly whole, but riddled with fine cracks that compromised its integrity. So many tiny fissures that Astrid had put there, only needing one more to break irreparably.

And there it was, the final blow in the admission that she wanted him, and he could not bear the weight of his unhappiness any longer. Two years of a meticulously crafted wall between himself and feelings crumbled in an instant, and he was suddenly drowning from the enormity of it all. Knowing Astrid's heart made everything impossibly worse, because there was no erasing it from his mind while they trudged along diverging paths. She would always be the unobtainable. Her, wanting him while she was with her husband. Hiccup, wanting her while he was with his wife, whomever that happened to be. Looks of

longing would always pass between them, around Berk and in the Great Hall, but they would go home to other people with the knowledge someone else was touching the skin their fingers yearned for.

It was enough to steal the air from his lungs, and his chest tightened like a vice. For the first time in a while, he was truly defenseless, and Astrid could destroy him.

"Don't," he pleaded, voice breaking. He stepped back, shaking his head with a hand partially extended to keep her at bay.

"This whole thing is a mess I don't know how to un-complicate..." Astrid took a step forward, chasing him. Advancing on him while he was falling apart and unable to do anything but stare into plaintive blue eyes gazing up at him. Gorgeous and damning.

Her hand slid over his shoulder, down the ridge of his collarbone to his chest, stinging him with its unnecessary affection.

"_Don't,_ " he practically begged, seizing her wrist to stop its lethal descent.

"I should do what's expected of me and be happy with Stefnir. I've really tried, you know? I don't have much of a choice. It was supposed to be easy for me because doing what's expected is all I've ever done, but...I just can't..." She hesitated, caught on her words. She chewed the inside of her lip, eyebrows knitting together, forlorn. She was just as exposed as he felt, and the entire world seemed to stop spinning around them. "...I just can't seem to fall out of love with you."

The coil in his stomach snapped, wound taught past the point it could handle. His gasp was a jagged, almost a dry sob, fingers confusing against Astrid's thin wrist. He could not speak. He had no more words to give. Staccato exhalations were all he managed as he bowed his head, examining his hand on her arm, and her hand on his chest. It was the first contact between them that was not repulsive, but no other touch could compare in how badly it hurt.

Astrid's other hand caressed his cheek, and his eyes fluttered closed as her thumb stroked him languidly. He supposed it was meant to be comforting, like the way she swept her searing fingertips over the angles of his face, coming to rest feather-light on his chin, tracing an old scar. Then, that same torturous hand was gliding around to the back of his head, through his hair with an almost demanding reassurance. _Feel better_, it insisted. _Be okay with this._

He surrendered to her, leaning forward as her touch suggested, until his forehead was against hers. He was emotionally haggard and everything in him felt limp, so he relied on the support from the same person who had beaten him down until he had no fight left. He caved to the feelings that would only shred him apart later when they faced the unchanging reality of Astrid's engagement. He released her wrist and placed his hand on her lower back, wanting her closer to him for he had no more strength to push her away. He wanted to give in and be consumed by the fire. She had always made him so woefully pathetic.

* * *

><p>Astrid's breath hitched when Hiccup guided her up against him, just barely so. She had forgotten how gentle he could be, especially when he had been fuming at her only moments before. It was an echo of the long-buried compassion she used to know.<p>

There had been a change in him. A relenting that she had not anticipated. An instant failing of his temper when she admitted she had feelings for him. She felt the tension evaporate from his body, all of the resentment morphing into defeat. It was palpable. She had not intended for things to unfold that way. She had only wanted to talk to him-to explain-but then Hiccup's lips had been as wonderful as she imagined they would be, two years later. She should not have kissed him and she knew it. She was only muddying the churning waters, but pursuing him was liberating in the way it defied everyone's expectations.

The proverbial sluice gate opened, and it was a bitter torrent she was not sure either one of them could stop. He had thought she was toying with him, that she somehow liked all those days enduring his cool indifference and the melancholy of braiding his hair. The angry, hard lines of his face had been a different kind of aggravation from that feigned apathy she had foolishly bought into.

He did not understand that it was an addiction, that she was compelled to be near him by something stronger than herself. That, if her presence was painful for him, then his was equally as painful for her. She could not keep herself from placing her hand on the glowing iron, inevitably burned by the fact that she was getting married and it was not to Hiccup.

But it should have been, though it was never supposed to be. So, they were caught in a toxic cycle of push-pull, maddening, but Astrid was regrettably sustained by it. Sustained by him, in spite of all his resistance.

Her hands roamed over him, exploring what was familiar and strange-the maturing form of the boyish frame she once knew well. His back and shoulders were broader, more defined from riding dragons and a heavy blacksmith's hammer, solid beneath his tunic like she never would have guessed. He was still tall and lanky like the boy she initially fell for, but with the new, subtle musculature of the man she fiercely wanted. Hiccup, with all the unique allure of his inelegant awkwardness that kept her tethered, spinning helpless, in his gravity.

She sighed, pressing her forehead to his. It made him withdraw slightly, but she cradled his head and held him in distressing proximity. Selfishly, she needed him there with her, unable to shoulder the complete mess alone. She could sense his discomfort, see the clenching of his jaw, and feel the reluctance in his touch. Acquiescence was not akin to a willing and eager acceptance.

"Why?" he murmured, quiet and worn. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"You know why," was her unsatisfactory reply, but she had already said it once, four letters of emotional condemnation. She would not explain herself a second time. Not when he was still so disinclined toward her, walking some ambiguous line as his hand rubbed across the small of her back in defiance of the rest of him.

Their noses brushed as they shared a breath, hot, moist, and tremulous, teeming with an energy like a gathering storm. Astrid could smell him, a combination of soot from the forge, leather, and the salt of the sea breeze that permeated everything. It was a scent her brain had never been more aware of, unconcerned with such details two years ago, but her heart remembered, though her head had always been inattentive.

"Hiccup," she whispered imploringly, for an equal response she had no right to ask from him. Her head tilted, almost involuntarily, seeking the faintest contact that was jarring to the core as her upper lip skimmed across his. She felt every nerve, every fiber, thrumming with a need for another taste of him. Another shot.

"We shouldn't do this," he said, though his words held no conviction. She could feel the puffs of his enunciation as their mouths hovered so close that the space between them was negligible. "We shouldn't..."

Then everything that was prudent and wise was lost in the way their lips melded together. There was a rush of deep satisfaction Astrid hoped he also felt, because that kiss, mutually sought, was incomparable to any other sense fulfillment she had ever known.

She cupped his face in her hands, feeling the warmth of his skin in her palms like a promise that he would stay, that he would not recoil again.

He was kissing her back, slow and uncertain, with inexperience beyond what she had stolen from him. With a conceited thrill, she realized no one else knew his lips as she did, and with a wave of shame, she knew he could not claim the same exclusivity. So, she kissed him harder, more fervent. Crushing their mouths together in the hopes it would erase any traces of Stefnir that lingered there, giving Hiccup what should of been his. Or, maybe never his, though what did it matter, really?

At that point, with boundaries crossed, it did not matter what was supposed to have been. Their people were never meant to live peacefully with dragons. Astrid was not supposed to have noticed the scrawny, fumbling boy who was never going to amount to anything. She was always going to marry Stefnir, that had been decided long ago, and she should have never found a distraction from that duty to her family. But Hiccup had changed the course of everything that ought to have been, setting a new trajectory that wrested her violently from the "perfect plan" that had been laid out for her life. Just like that, he was at the center of everything, and what was supposed to be was smothered to death by what actually was-Hiccup's lips moving against her own.

A part of her registered that the mouth she was kissing was different, not the same pressure or fullness that had become routine, but another part of her, bigger and thunderous, felt that it was right.

She captured his bottom lip when breathing was imminent, drawing back with an intimate suck that she never felt Stefnir deserved. But he probably did. He was her intended, and he deserved it in a way Hiccup did not, though she stood there miles from home, wrapped up in the

attentions of a man she could never be with like it was the last time. It very well_ could _be the last time, if one of them managed to come to their senses.

It really needed to be the last time for their sanity, for their dignity, for the truth that it was never going to go anywhere but face-first into the dirt...

Hiccup was gazing at her with conflicted desire, breathing a little too heavily to be truly alright with any of it. His hand was still conspicuously still on her back, holding her insecurely. Close, but not close enough.

She inched forward, feeling the surge of rapturous guilt as her body fit into his with a flawlessness that was insulting to the remnants of her scruples. Hiccup shuddered-or maybe that was her-and his arms came around her with the final loosening of his inhibitions. He was invested in it too, from that moment. Stefnir, who had been an underlying irritation grating on Astrid's conscience, faded into a distant second thought that was nearly imperceptible when Hiccup initiated another kiss with unfurling assuredness.

Her hand ran through his hair, soft russet between her fingers that were no longer encumbered by faulty perceptions. Up and down, glancing over his scalp, tangling in strands shorter than her intended's-more pleasant than her intended's. Her other hand returned to his chest, gripping his tunic because it was the least dangerous thing she could do.

Somehow, she thought she could take a breath with their lips connected, but Hiccup persisted, and then everything became desperate frenzy of open-mouths and ragged gasps. Suddenly, they had bounded into new territory, hot and urgent, and further than she had ever gone with Stefnir. It was terrifying and exciting, wonderful and wrong. She leaned into Hiccup, coming up on her toes just as his knees buckled. They fell, and Hiccup caught himself. He was half-sitting, half-lying, propped up by one hand as Astrid landed in his lap, straddling him on the damp, black sand. It was ridiculous and compromising, perfectly shameless as if they had coordinated it.

And they did not stop.

Astrid yanked on his clothes, dragging him up to meet her by fistfuls of green fabric, because they were running headlong into disaster and neither one of them was interested in slowing down. There was no more patience between them to entertain the sensible. Two years of trying to behave, of trying to move on like a couple of mature adults, was wasted effort for anything but the driving force behind their impropriety. They had been contents under pressure, fated to explode in either screams or colliding passions-or, as it so happened, both.

Their kiss was clumsy and aggressive, too much grazing of teeth. Then Astrid found Hiccup's tongue, coaxed it with a timid flick of her own, and melted into him when he invaded her mouth. It was sloppy and lacking finesse. It was unrefined and raw-the most honesty he had shown her in a while. A whimper escaped her and Hiccup sat up straighter, grasping her arms tightly. She battled him, sliding her tongue over his in a bid for dominance, because they were equally

matched in heady desire and brazen stupidity.

His hands traveled down her arms with deliberate pressure, truly feeling her, _learning _her, and he really should not have been, because it made Astrid too aware of his fingers, his callouses. Her arms were harmless expanses of flesh, but every bit of skin Hiccup touched became an erogenous zone. And they were heat. Two blazing entities suffocating as they burned up all the air between them.

She was stroking him, rubbing over his chest like she was trying to ignite more sparks. More friction. There would be nothing left of them, those pitiful, anguished teens. What would emerge from their ashes was anyone's guess. Hopefully something beautiful, but likely something more tragic. The present was all Astrid could bear to think about, not tomorrow or the next day. Not the regret, nor the mortification, nor the queasiness in her stomach whenever she looked at Hiccup as she hung on Stefnir like the dutiful fiancée. She could not think about the humiliation, and though Hiccup was the only other person who would know, it was disconcerting _because _it was him, and he mattered-what he thought, what he felt. Would he blame her? Hate her? Resent her for the additional weight they had to carry?

With much difficulty, Astrid wrenched her mouth away from his, staring into his eyes, so dark in the silver light of the evening. So unreadable. They were both panting, and their foreheads came together to brace one another through their dizzying high.

"Hiccup," she murmured, swollen lips brushing his cheek, "I shouldn't have...I'm sorry." Because an apology was in order, though she could not pinpoint one thing. It was all of it. Yes, a little remorse was called for as her hips angled down, seeking him, grinding against his lap.

"This is wrong," he insisted, grasping her waist and kneading it as her body rolled beneath his hands.

"I know, I _know._" Astrid tilted her head back with a groan, one of vexation and licentious hunger.

Hiccup closed his eyes, leaning forward until his head rested just beneath her collarbone and his face was flirting with the valley of her breasts. She held him there, embracing him and gazing up at the unblinking, voyeuristic stars. He was gripping her hips then, mindful of the spikes of her skirt. She moved over him, slowly, dragging woolen leggings over tight leather.

"We have to stop this," he rasped, contrary to the way he subtly pulled her closer. He mapped her contours as she rocked their lower bodies together.

>Astrid wanted the fabric barriers gone. She wanted to feel the warmth of his fingertips gliding over her thighs and his breath dispersing over her breasts-but that would kill them. If nothing else, that surely would.

"Hiccup, I don't want to," she admitted. It would have to be him. Unfairly, another burden was placed on him, because she could not be the one to willingly end their tryst. To choose to submit to her conscience and be faithful to Stefnir. She had indulged too much. Drank too greedily from the forbidden. It had to be Hiccup that pushed her away, rebuffed her advances for the sake of their

souls.

He glanced up at her, and she captured his lips. There was no way she could not. She was not strong enough.

"This won't go anywhere," he hissed between fervent pecks.
"This...we're only doing more damage."

She knew that, but she did not care as much as she should. Astrid hummed against his thin lips, absorbing every last bit of pleasure from their indiscretion. "Tell me to stop," she pleaded. "Hiccup, you have to _tell _me-"

A firm, drawn out kiss interrupted her. It was blissfully scathing.

"I won't," he told her. "I can't."

"Why?" Their mouths ghosted over one another, teasing.

"Because I can't seem to fall out of love with you, either." He answered decisively, and Astrid moaned tasting and savoring those words in the breath they shared. "Because I'm an idiot."

"Hiccup..." She was groping at his belt, absent of higher thought as the buckle clinked enticingly.

Then Toothless warbled, and it snapped Hiccup out of his trance. His brow knitted together over half-lidded eyes, and Astrid felt his caresses falter. His eyes flickered down to her staggering attempt to undress him and there was the chagrined rush she had been waiting for-the inevitable result of throwing prudence to the wind. Her lungs ached from the sweltering panic, making her bristle and stealing the air from her body. Her chest heaved with mounting regret and shame hung thickly in the back of her throat.

"You have to get off of me," he said firmly, and it was his common sense returning to him with a vengeance. "Y-you have to-"

Astrid scrambled off his lap, covering her mouth to stifle the sudden urge to vomit. She could not look at him, staring out at the glimmering waves playing so obliviously in the moonlight. Their last kiss was still fresh and tingling on her lips, beseeching for more and making her despise herself for it. What had so briefly and desperately transpired between them was over, and all that remained in the aftermath was embarrassment, with the threat of bitterness to follow.

"I'm sorry." Her throat was dry and her voice, hoarse. She swallowed hard and strode toward Stormfly, eyes downcast.

She was going to flee that beach. She was going to hurry home to Stefnir and never go near Hiccup again. She would spend the rest of her life as the loyal wife Stefnir expected her to be. She would not blur anymore lines, overstep any more boundaries, or challenge the conventional. Things only seemed to fall to irreparable ruin when she did.

"Stop." It was not a command, but a request. Long fingers encircled her wrist with the most innocuous grip. "Wait."

Astrid sighed heavily, blinking invisible tears of frustration. She willed herself to hold it together, retain some self-respect as she turned to face Hiccup. It didn't matter that they loved each other, albeit reluctantly. Nothing could come of it, yet she had pushed the issue anyway. She was the instigator, and she knew it. _He _knew it-he had to. She had propelled them into calamity, trying to step back when it became too real, making an already horrendous situation impossibly more complicated because she was selfish. It had felt good for a time, but she her conscience could only flit about in the wake of it, trying to piece together the shards of her pride.

"I'll go back to Stefnir," she declared. "I'll leave you alone. I won't speak of this to anyone. You can just-"

Hiccup kissed her, and she wanted to disappear, closing her eyes and grimacing. He had been shaking his head as she spoke before boldly claiming her lips to add further insult to reason. It was a deplorable thing, because she could only relish in it, in spite of her reservations.

"I don't want that and neither do you," Hiccup replied, sounding annoyed. Unarguably fed up with her hurtful vacillating. Astrid did not know where he had found the sudden confidence to speak for them both, even if it was true.

She stepped back from him into the open arms of her renewed sense of responsibility, because it was safe there. Everything was predictable. Everything was simpler.

She mounted Stormfly, tucking her hair behind her ears with quivering fingers.

"I'm...I'm going back to Berk. No one knows I left. They'll be looking for me." She spoke quickly, wanting to make her intentions known before Hiccup could argue.

>She was going back to her fiance and her parents, back to the Astrid that did as she was told. The girl that everyone could depend on, because her word was her bond and she did not give in to unrealistic whims.<p>

She had to know if she could return to a semblance of normalcy, because no matter what she and Hiccup were to each other then, there was no going forward with it. Not on Berk. She had to get back to a few hours ago and figure out whether or not she had lost track of herself completely.

"Whatever this is, Astrid, I'm not leaving it here." Hiccup was backing toward Toothless and she knew that he meant it.

A shrinking, but audacious part of her was glad was he so determined. That whisper of temptation wanted her to stay on Dragon Island and find out just how far they were willing to go, where they would stop, and if they could truly dissolve two years of a sullied relationship.

But she nudged her dragon with her heels, and she was racing toward the night sky in retreat. It was an strange and unnerving sensation for her to be running from anything.

* * *

><p>Stormfly returned to her stall with very little guidance. She flapped her wings and cocked her head to the side as she considered her rider with curious yellow eyes. Dragons could be eerily perceptive, and the Nadder knew something was amiss, so Astrid tried not to look at her. Stormfly did not need more reason to fret from a great emotional upheaval beyond her capacity to understand.<p>

"Good girl," Astrid cooed, stroking Stormfly's snout before leaving the stables.

If she was lucky, she could make it to her bedroom without any further interactions. She needed to collect her thoughts and sort through all of the indecent rubbish without Stefnir or her parents adding to the pile.

>But that would have been too easy. That was the good fortune of someone actually deserving of it.<p>

Footsteps and the eager jingling of armor captured her attention like a skittish rabbit in a snare trap. She turned around with swelling dread, recognizing that particular melody of jostling metal. She knew that towering, chiseled frame before she even could make out the face.

Her heartbeat was erratic as Stefnir hurried toward her, alight at the sight of her. He was impressive in the interplay of bright moonlight and shadow, flashing off his armor and defining his wealth of muscle. She wiped her sweaty palms on her tunic with wavering smiles she hoped was convincing in the darkness.

"You weren't at dinner," he said, quirking an eyebrow. "I was beginning to wonder where you'd gone."

He hugged her and she tensed, fingers curled and rigid above his shoulders. Her hands trembled and she settled for patting his back awkwardly, uncertain what feelings might be betrayed if she tried to hold him.

"I was out flying," she replied, wiggling out of his embrace without being too conspicuous in her displeasure. A tender hand on his chest served to be affectionate, but she withdrew it almost instantly. Her expression was placid though her insides squirmed.

"Where?" he asked, rubbing her arms like he always did, though it felt like a foreign and unwelcome contact. She wished he did not want to feel her skin. His hands were too large and assertive in a way she previously had not noticed. "I didn't see-"

"Just...around. I don't know. I wasn't paying attention." She was trying not to sound too perturbed, trying not to let her eyes dart around too much. His touch repulsed her more than it should. For the first time, she had other caresses to compare it with.

"You should tell me before you just up and leave like that," Stefnir sighed with a small, exasperated smile, much too similar to a parent's mild criticism.

"I didn't realize I needed an escort." She was a dragon rider, damn it. Pioneering dangerous stunts on her Nadder before Stefnir had even

named his Monstrous Nightmare. After two years, she expected more independence, but he only seemed to be gradually tightening the reins. It was conceivable that it was only a part of marriage she had not expected.

"As your future husband, don't you think I deserve to know these things?" He tugged at the end of her braid, childishly emphatic, as if she could not understand his meaning otherwise.

"Maybe if you believe I'm doing something duplicitous."

Stefnir chuckled, gripping her waist and pulling her flush against him. Her flesh crawled in protest as he leaned in. "I know you better than that."

He kissed her and she screwed her eyes shut, lips tightly pursed beneath his. Her mouth felt besieged, still tender and abused from earlier. She wanted to shove him away, no longer accepting of those thicker, rougher lips, but she had no excuse. None that would adequately explain her change of heart, save for the truth, which was not an option.

His hand snaked beneath her braid to the nape of her neck, unwittingly holding her against her will as she stood frozen in place by her family's inescapable commitment, sacrificing her own desires for reputation and honor. It was the Hofferson way.

A dragon flew overhead, camouflaged against the black of night like only one creature she knew of.

And it was all she could do to keep from screaming.

6. Chapter 6

"So, you told him?" Stefnir asked, studying Astrid closely over folded hands. It was becoming much too common. Much too second nature for him to ask his probing questions as if he was entitled to the answers, to know everything about her and how she spent every moment.

Astrid frowned at him, a bite of porridge hovering at her lips. She straightened up, returning the spoonful to the rest of the bowl. Her appetite instantly evaporated into a gathering swell of annoyance.

"Yes, I told him," she answered. She determinedly kept her eyes on her fianc e, finding it only slightly less painful than shifting her gaze to the tall, slim figure a couple of tables away. "Why does _he_ matter to you, specifically?"

Stefnir rubbed his chin thoughtfully, casting a conspicuous glance in Hiccup's direction. Astrid continued to stare at her intended, jaw set though her skin prickled to think deep, green eyes could be roaming over her with the same torturous gentleness of warm blacksmith's hands  a caress that had been haunting her from the moment she had left the Dragon Island. She had not slept very well, tossing and turning and wrestling with the urge to leave the comfort of her bed and seek unfamiliar blankets  give into that dangerous addiction, slender arms and hints of ash and fresh leather.

She bit back titillating memories, only hours old, teeth grinding into her bottom lip. As Stefnir glanced back at her, she quickly stuffed her spoon in her mouth. Gods forbid he think her enticement was his doing.

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Stefnir said decisively.

Astrid gaped at him, spoon wobbling precariously from her lips. Her eyes narrowed. "How does he look at me?"

"Like you owe him something."

Astrid scoffed at the idea and her fianc e's poor understanding of Hiccup Horrendous Haddock. "I don't owe him anything."

"That's right, you don't." He reached across the table for her, fingertips barely grazing across her knuckles before she curled her hand into a tight fist and withdrew it. "Astrid, what's ?"

"I have to meet my mother," she blurted out, springing to her feet. She realized, as her spoon clattered into bowl, that she was forfeiting breakfast, but she was committed to her excuse. "Wedding stuff," she added hurriedly.

>Stefnir leaned back, considering her with a small nod and a soft grunt. His expression was searching in a way that made her tense, so she flashed him a loving smile that was as empty as her stomach.<p>

She laid her hands against the table top, bending far over to place a kiss on his lips, trying to inject some warmth into it in spite of her trembling fingers and the nauseous roll of her stomach. His mouth was the only one she had known for two years, memorizing its taste, its texture, and its width. It should have been normal. Comfortable. It should have been what her own lips expected to feel, but there was an internal scream of protest-a claim of wrongness to the kiss that she could not ignore.

"Mmn," Stefnir hummed, a smirk gracing his features as she pulled back. She tried to reciprocate, but she was confident she only succeeded in looking pained.

>Tucking loose strands of hair behind her ears and said, "I'll meet up with you later."<p>

He appeared satisfied, and she hurried toward the doors to escape the discomfort of his presence. She was not a routine liar, so she decided to head for home, though listening to her mother fuss over wedding details was not a particularly interesting use of her time. Still, it would be less of a hassle than later feeding her suspicious fianc e another excuse why she never did spend the afternoon doing as she said. It was like he did not trust her  never had, really  and ironically she had finally given him a reason not to, and she was resolute that he never know of it.

She pried open one of the ornate doors, glancing back over her shoulder, unsurprised to see Stefnir watching her leave. It was expected, but two tables over, vibrant green flashed in her direction. It was only for a moment, then Hiccup was engaged in deep conversation with Snotlout and Fishlegs, but she was certain she had

seen it. So sure those eyes had rested on her for even a fraction of a second.

Her heart stumbled for a beat and she whipped around to drive the wedge between the sagacious and reckless halves of herself, easily tempted. Those two warring bits of conscience were melding dangerously in the Great Hall, filling her head with terrible thoughts of sliding into Hiccup's lap while her fianc e watched with burning jealousy. Her hands dragging over resplendent fabric, stroking lissome muscle, would undoubtedly incite Stefnir to violence. It would not absolve her of anything to flaunt her infidelity, nor free her from her arranged marriage. If anything, Stefnir would only tighten his grip on her, lash out at Hiccup, and it would be disastrous for everyone.

She hurried down the stone steps, trying to bury everything for a time. She had to focus on acting thrilled at the prospect of marriage, of being the giddy bride people would expect her to be. She would tell her mother it was time for the official announcement to the village, then start planning the whole thing like she was fit to burst with anticipation.

It would not be completely false. She_ was_ fit to burst  with misery.

The dreary morning clouds reflected her mood with their stark grey shades, heavy like her mind. She sighed up at them in confession of everything, wishing she could pour out her soul like the impending deluge. Thunder rolled like judgment  like Thor was admonishing for all of her misdeeds. At the first cool raindrops, her pace quickened. She jogged home, taking a steadying breath as she stepped inside.

Her mother smiled, glancing up from her sewing. It was a rich, cerulean material draped across her lap in sumptuous waves. Undoubtedly expensive, even for their family, Astrid had an inkling it was meant for her.

"This is nice," she said, rubbing the delicate fabric between her fingers, appreciating the fine threads and their vibrancy. It was reminiscent of Haddock clothing  they had the best quality of everything. "Where'd it come from?"

"It was a gift from the Svensons, for ye. Fer yer weddin'. They told me ye and Stefnir were ready te move things along, and I wanted te get an early start on yer gown. Best not te rush it. So generous of them  " her mother answered, smoothing over the luxurious fibers almost covetously.

"Yeah, no kidding. I'm surprised Fura didn't keep it for herself. She usually takes a bit of her husband's best wares before the rest of us can glimpse them," Astrid muttered, sauntering into the kitchen space. She rummaged around in baskets for something to soothe her rumbling stomach, settling on an apple.

"She probably just thought ye would look better in it, dear. I happen te agree." Her mother's lips were a tight, disapproving line.

"Mm. Better to display me in." Astrid leaned back against the dinner table, watching her mother stitch beads along the silk trim. "Can't

have anything 'Svenson' that's less than perfectly polished."

"That's a very cynical attitude te have fer yer in-laws. They are te be family, Astrid."

"All the more right I have to complain."

Her mother's arms fell to her lap and she furrowed her brow critically. "I thought things were goin' well between ye and Stefnir. Don't tell me yeh've done somethin' te chase him off?"

Astrid snorted, taking a bite of her apple. She swallowed and retorted, "I couldn't shake him if I tried. When he wants something, he's beastly about it. No, I've got a firm hold on him, mom. You needn't worry about that. I've done my part, as promised."

"Don't act like it's the end of yer life. Without arranged marriages, ye never would've come into this world. Good things can come of 'em."

"Like wealth. Pretty things?" Astrid shook a corner of the blue fabric pointedly. She took another bite of her apple.

"And love, if yeh'd stop bein' so damn obstinate!" Her mother chided. Astrid rolled her eyes and paced the room. "Stefnir cares fer ye, but yer so determined te sulk behind closed doors. In marriage, yeh can be happy, or yeh can be unhappy. It's yer choice, but either way, this weddin' will happen. The agreement has long been set. It's a smart match. Both our clans will only te prosper. Isn't that worth somethin' te ye?"

"Of course, it's worth something! I'm going along with it, aren't I?" Astrid snapped. She flung her arm in the general direction of the Great Hall. "I've got them all convinced! I think I've done a damn good job."

Her mother nodded, pulling her needle through the precious material. "Ye have. Yeh'll be set fer life. There's nothin' a parent wants more than te ensure their children are taken care of."

Astrid stared bitterly at the floor, balling her hand into a fist. The rain was pelting the house in a steady rhythm, muffling the thoughts she worried her mother might hear otherwise. Furious and resentful, wanting to screech her displeasure at the top of her lungs until someone truly heard her. She suddenly hated that beautiful fabric, as if it were a banner of her entrapment. As if it were the thing keeping her parents staunchly against her freedom. A symbol of her autonomy, sold for status and material gain. Well, if that was truly what it was about—the security of wealth and power—

"What if there was another clan out there more suitable than the Svensons?" she asked, turning her apple slowly in her hand. She brought it to her mouth, studying her mother carefully as her teeth sank into crisp fruit.

Her mother scoffed, shaking her head. She did not look up as she secured beads with fastidious little jerks of her needle. "Oh? Which clan did ye have in mind? The Jorgensons? As I recall, Snotlout repulses ye now. Ye should be thankin' us fer sparin' ye in that

case. Spitelout came 'round askin' years ago."

Astrid suppressed the ill shiver as the thought of having Snotlout as her intended. She inhaled sharply, not daring to meet her mother's gaze as she mumbled, "If it's security you want for me, I meanâ€|there's the Haddocksâ€|"

She raised her eyes cautiously, holding her breath, only to lock with her mother's piercing scrutiny.

"I thought we nipped that in the bud, dear." The endearment was meant to cut the acidity of her tone, but accusation still dripped from every syllable.

Astrid felt her face burn, there was no way to play it off casually, but that would not stop her. "I'mâ€"yes. I didn't mean anything by it, I was just saying the chief mightâ€""

Her mother flipped her hair back with a toss of her head in a manner Astrid knew all too well. It was, apparently, one of those inheritable traits. "The chief cannot dissolve a standin' contract between families," she explained. "Stoick will not get involved just because ye are uncomfortable with the idea of marriage, unless the Svensons feel wronged or they cross usâ€"neither which I foresee happenin'."

"Fine. What about divorce?"

"_Astrid!_" Her mother's eyes widened and her nostrils flared. The muscles in her neck tightened at the very hint of scandal.

"It's the best situation!" Astrid held up her hands, placating. "I can marry Stefnir and, that way, no one's word is broken. Then, if I go on to marry Hiccupâ€""

"Ye wouldn't." There was such a finality in her mother's tone that Astrid was taken back, lips parting in silent bewilderment. "His first marriage must be to a maiden to ensure the legitimacy of an heir. He can't have someone that's been touched by another manâ€"especially not right after ye divorced Stefnir, Astrid, for the sake of the gods, child! Ye will marry Stefnir, and Hiccup will marry someone outside of Berk, politically, just as his father before him, and so on."

Astrid's chest heaved at the very thought of Hiccup pledging his devotion to another woman. He would be kind to her, of course, compelled to make her feel welcome among his people. His warmth would undoubtedly earn her affections in a short time, and the mental image of him wrapped around a different set of curves was enough to make Astrid's stomach churn with revulsion. She had a seething hatred for this personâ€"nameless, faceless, and just an idea that would someday be realized.

"But suppose he didn't loveâ€"?" she asked weakly.

"Love isn't a necessity, but stability is fundamental. If ye happen to fall in love along the way, then yeh're one of the lucky ones." Her mother went back to her sewing, sharp eyes only flickering up for a moment. "I am surprised ye wish to fixate on such things."

"I don't. Iâ€¦it was just speculating." Astrid took a seat at the table, swiveling on the bench to face her mother. "I guess we can make the engagement official tonight at dinnerâ€¦"announce it, I mean."

"Think yeh're ready fer that?" her mother wondered, but it was not as much a genuine question as a demandâ€¦"a call to get her mind right on the issue.

>Astrid brought her elbows to her thighs, bending in the defeat, burying her face in one hand. Her nails dug into the apple's skin in the other.<p>

"Do I really have a choice?" she mumbled.

"Of course ye do, but ye might as well make the right one. It will make this whole experience less painful fer ye."

Astrid laughed dryly, hollow and beaten down. "Somehow, mom, I don't think that's possible."

"Then at least distract yerself. Yeh'll need a headdress fer the wedding. Start thinkin' about the flowers yeh want in it."

"Because that's what really mattersâ€¦" Astrid closed her eyes and raked fingers through her bangs, exhaling every last particle of hope.

There was no sympathy to be spared anywhere. Her mother stated, "Well, until ye say those vows, it had better be."

* * *

><p>Hiccup ducked as a hammer was swung haphazardly at his head. Years of dodging irritated blows from his mentor had made him plenty agile. Gobber sneered, hobbling back to his anvil to shape malleable iron glowing a fiery orange.<p>

"I should take yer head off fer abandonin' the forge!" he snapped, pounding away at the heated metal. His false tooth was juttied out of his bottom lip in annoyance. He gripped his pair tongs firmly, sparks flying as if they were manifestations of his ire. It used to be intimidating, back when Hiccup was only ten and first sent to study blacksmithing with the colossal man. "Ye left the fire burnin', unattended! That is first year stuff, Hiccup!" He flourished his hammer prosthesis condescendingly. "Do we need te review the basics again?"

"Well, if you insist. _I'm_ good, though," Hiccup teased, removing his apron from the wall.

Gobber's face fell, glaring at him from under bushy eyebrows. "Yeh can be such a shit, do ye know that?"

Hiccup gave a small shrug, tying his apron behind his back with nimble fingers. "A matter of opinion."

"A matter of _fact!_" Gobber retorted. "Now get on that crucible. I need two dozen studs."

"I completed all of the orders you had set for me to finish

yesterday. Really, I make your job substantially easier." Hiccup slipped another set of tongs from the wall.

"Oh, ayeâ€"but ye make my headaches substantially worse." Gobber nodded toward the pile of raw material to be melted down.

Hiccup divided up the appropriate amount of ore to be placed in the crucible. "Eh, the good with the bad, right?"

The older Viking grunted, returning to his work. The sound of his hammer tempering the hot ore rang loudly in the shop, overpowering the howling wind and incessant rainfall. Close bolts of lightning flashed out on the sea, and cracks of thunder reverberated through the groundâ€"but inclement weather was not a sufficient excuse for shirking work for the day. Hiccup secured the crucible with his long and heavy tongs, moving it into the forge and compressing the bellows to rouse the flames into a frenzy.

"Where did ye run off te, anyway?" Gobber asked between strikes of his hammer and rolls of thunder.

"Why does it matter?" Hiccup replied, bristling at the rather honest question. Images assaulted him, of black sand and soft hair, luminous in silver moonbeams.

"I think I deserve te know what's more pressing than my smithy!"

Hiccup wished the roaring fire was solely to blame for fine sheen of perspiration breaking out along his upper lip and hairline. If he closed his eyes and reflected on things, he could still recall the weight of Astrid in his lap, feel the tantalizing pressure of her hips grinding against his. "I went to Dragon Island."

Gobber was clearly puzzled, pausing mid-swing to mull it over. "Why would yeâ€"?"

"Never mind why!" Hiccup's ears were burning and he hoped the light of the forge masked his reddening complexion.

He could not admit he had fled the village to brood over unrequited love. Gobber would undoubtedly think him pathetic for it. A Viking would not admit to such things. His mentor would only care to hear the more ribald detailsâ€"the dance of tongues and passionate rubbing, especially if any awkward and uncomfortable feelings arose in the process. Those were the acceptable detailsâ€"eager groping and inconvenient erections, bawdy things worth laughing about.

That was, of course, disregarding the fact that what happened on Dragon Island should never have occurred in the first place. In all actuality, Gobber would have a wealth of criticism and advice he had no need for. Astrid's lips had been a remedy, a cure for the anguish coursing through Hiccup like a poison, killing him with an inescapable despondency. She brought him back from that pit, obliterated all of his self-control. His initial reluctance to kiss her had been the dying breath of his common sense. Then everything had been desire without thought, touching on instinct. That long suppressed need for her had driven the conservative exploration of her body, and every movement of his lips against her mouth.

He did not know what was to become of them. Practicality had returned and their affections had come to a jarring stop. They had parted suddenly and without resolution. Astrid had not spoken to him since, but he felt itâ€”a fundamental change. The current of their strained relationship had shifted, though Hiccup could not imagine where they would wash up. There was only one thing of which he was truly certain, no one else could know. The fallout would be catastrophic for the both of them, a calumnious firestorm of consequence and shame, reputations irreparably tarnished. Hiccup cared less about such things for himself. He was no stranger to rebuke and scorn, even if it had been a while since he deserved any, but Astrid was a different kind of soul entirely, with an insatiable drive to please those that counted, along with her severe perfectionism. He did not wish to throw her into scandal, least of all before they _were_ anything scandalous to be flustered about.

"Ye can't be runnin' off whenever ye feel like it!" Gobber scolded, plunging the blazing iron into a bucket of water. It hissed in a way that matched the older man's scowl, as if everything in the forge was a reflection of the cantankerous blacksmith. "The Selection is around the corner, and we'll be drownin' in orders fer the kiddy saddles."

"I know that," Hiccup replied flatly. How could he not? He had been present at every Selection since its inceptionâ€”granted, that had only been two of them, but it mattered. He would attend even if his father did not insist on it. He almost had to, in case any of the ten-year-olds needed guidance. Any members of the academy could do the job, but he did not think it egotistical to say when it came to forging lasting bonds with dragons, he was the expert.

He compressed the bellows again, the ore nearly melted to the proper consistency.

"You'll be attendin' the ceremony with yer father, no doubt." Gobber removed his work piece from the water and limped over to the forge. "Which'll leave me on my own fer a couple of days, so don't think I won't run ye ragged before then." He returned the metal to the flames.

Hiccup's lips twitched into a sardonic half-smirk.

"Please do. I'd rather be in here than out amongst everyone else. If it's not talk about the Selection, it's all the upcoming marriage season." He grasped the end of his tongs, carefully walking the crucible to the workbench where the molds were set.

"Ach, don't I know it? I've heard whispers this mornin' that one's to be set fer the end of the month. A little early, if ye ask me. Who would be that eager teâ€”?"

There was a moment's hesitation, where Hiccup could not seem to form the words, but acceptance of the seemingly inevitable forced them from his lips. "Stefnir and Astrid," he muttered. The way his jaw clenched had become an involuntary response.

There was a palpable uneasiness that he did not need to look at Gobber to feel. Hiccup could hear the older Viking clear his throat, and there was a jangle of metal in the forge as he shifted his tongs around idly.

Hiccup could imagine the pitying glance as Gobber replied, "Oh. I, ehâ€¦I see."

But Hiccup could not care less than the older man saw him as a wounded animal. There would be time to lament the wedding. There would come a day, sooner rather than later, where the pain of Astrid's relationship with Stefnir would inflict far greater injury than it ever had. Before, the sting of seeing her with someone else was partially offset by frustration with himself.

It had still been one-sided then. Then suddenly, that gaping sore was healed and a new one was being torn open beside it. Bigger, deeper, more raw. To know Astrid loved him back, in some capacity, made it all the more terrible at the same time it had just began to feel wonderful. It would be a whole new torture to watch her say the vows to Stefnir, knowing they were not heartfelt. To know she would be giving herself to someone she did not want. To see her kiss him and know what those lips felt like, tasted like. It was almost intolerable.

All of it was still a distant glimmer, drawing ever closer, though it was still too far off to truly appreciate its scope. It was black clouds of a new storm billowing on the horizon while Hiccup was determined to enjoy the temporary rays of sunlight. He and Astrid were going to have to face itâ€"what they were, what they could never be, and what they had so foolishly done. But, he would not take for granted that briefly, she wanted him. Briefly, she could have him. She was his until Stefnir was her husband, and until Hiccup could process the futility of a relationship with Astrid, he would enjoy curling up with her in the hole they dug for themselves. For so long, he had ached for her. False apathy was an insidious form of self-destruction, and propriety was not enough to dissuade him from trying to put some pieces of himself back into place. He was so thankful that, for a moment, he was no longer hurting. Not like he used to, and not anything like he eventually would experience.

So, as he meticulously poured liquid iron into molds, it was not quite as insincere as it once was when he said, "Good for them."

* * *

><p>Astrid felt uncomfortable in her own skin, hanging on Stefnir's arm and smiling amid all of the claps and back-slapping. She looked so thrilled at the announcement of their engagement, but it was not her. She had been rehearsing. Always rehearsing.<p>

It was a character, the girl she had tried to believe she was for the past two years. She had been so convincing to everyone else that she had almost bought into the lie, but Dragon Island had awoken her from her trance. The little moments stolen with Hiccup leading up to it, though he had never reciprocated, had kept her somewhat in touch with her real self. She had not given into the illusion completely because Hiccup was her anchor to reality, as harsh as the truth of "them" was.

She wondered how long she would last in marriage. How long would she maintain her spirit before she was crushed under the farce? Before she gave up and stopped fighting altogether? Before all the passion in her fizzled out?

She gladly accepted a congratulatory tankard of ale when it was offered. As the drink sloshed over her tongue, it was the only thing about the entire scene that felt normal. Stefnir kept pulling her close, kissing her head, and she had to will herself not to tense, and the ale would hopefully help with that.

They made the rounds, Stefnir showing her off before the entire Great Hall as his best accomplishment. It was embarrassing, though he was well within his right to do so. It would have even been flattering, if Astrid was not the odd part—the thing that did not quite fit in the joyous equation. The charade was bearable in front of neighbors, those with whom she did not regularly interact, but her friends there as well. Their ambivalent faces were like a punch to the gut, and she could not quite manage a smile for them.

Stefnir quickly led her elsewhere. She was no longer an integral part of the academy's social circle and so he wanted her to pour more energy into his friends and the loose bonds she had with them. It was easier for her to lie when she was not emotionally invested. It was a great deal harder to act pleased when Stefnir finally paraded her in front of the chief. She felt dangerously transparent under the examination of Stoick the Vast. She wondered if Hiccup often felt the same, and she flashed her chief a genial smile before drowning it in her mug.

"Congratulations, to the both of ye," Stoick said, and it was such a genuine air that Astrid's guilt intensified about tenfold.

She wanted to blurt out apology, seek forgiveness for the undue pain she had caused his son. She wanted to beg for him to dissolve the arrangement between her clan and the Svensons, but Stoick was lawful and fair. He would not do such a thing unless it was warranted by more than personal bias. Her mother had made that clear enough.

"I hope it's not asking too much to do it so soon after the Selection," Stefnir said.

"To go from the Selection to a weddin' between two prominent clans means prolonged festivities and high spirits for our people. I wouldn't say I'm too displeased," Stoick replied. "We do need to discuss the buildin' of yer new home, however. I suggest ye speak with Thorston when ye have the chance."<p>

"I'll get right on that."

The two men began discussing matters in which Astrid had little interest—talk of construction and the Svenson family trade. As her fiancé droned on, she scanned the Great Hall for the only person she wanted to see.

Hiccup had been notably absent from the chattering throngs of well-wishers, but she spotted him among the other academy members. Reemerging from wherever he hid when she and Stefnir had come around their table. She expected him to keep his back turned, speaking to the twins about whatever he found pressing, but he glanced over his shoulder and their eyes met with disarming suddenness.

Heat surged through her and there was a fluttering sensation in her stomach. Anxiety gripped her—an urgency to free herself from her fiancé for the evening. To escape the crowded Great Hall for

somewhere quiet. Somewhere intimate. It would be worth it just to be alone with her thoughts, but she fully intended to have company.

With the tiniest jerk of her head toward the doors, she hoped Hiccup got the message.

"I think I'm going to take Stormfly out," Astrid said, gazing up at Stefnir with as much innocence as she could muster.

Stefnir stopped mid-sentence, quirking an eyebrow as he turned from the chief to consider her. "This late? In the middle of all this?" he gestured around at the rest of the room, still buzzing with anticipation of their impending nuptials.

>"It's been storming all day. She's been cooped up in the stables. I think she needs to stretch out her wings."<p>

Stefnir did not look convinced. "We should both stay here," he insisted, "for everyone."

"Getting married doesn't mean my dragon comes second," she argued, shrugging off his arm.

"Ah, let her go," Stoick interjected, and Astrid could have hugged him with abundant gratitude. "This isn't the end of the celebration."

Stefnir glanced between the chief and Astrid, and she could see him struggling for a suitable rebuttal, but he fell short. He leaned in to kiss her, and she quickly raised her mug, tipping back the last drops of her ale. He settled for her cheek, frowning.

"I pray, my love, do not weep for me," she told him dramatically, gently pinching his chin between her thumb and index finger. Stoick chuckled softly but Stefnir only furrowed his brow, missing the poetic reference entirely. She had forgotten her intended was not the most well-read man on Berk.

She smiled reassuringly then turned on her heel, weaving through the sea of Vikings toward the doors. She cast a sidelong glance toward the other academy members, face falling when she saw Hiccup standing there, still talking with the twins. Perhaps he had not picked up on her little cue? She felt a welling disappointment, but Stormfly was worth the escape.

She set her empty mug on a table as she fled the Great Hall, finding comfort in the silence of the village. There was no clanging metal from the forge, and only the cry of Terrible Terrors disrupted the still and quiet of Berk at night. The lingering smell of rain permeated everything, and puddles reflected the stars above, almost to suggest the ground had opened up to reveal another expanse of sky. No one would bother her as she jogged toward the stables, mud squelching underfoot, for nearly everyone was drinking themselves into an evening stupor.

The stifling heat of hundreds of dragons nestled in their stalls was strangely welcoming. Though the air was thick and humid with their collective body heat, Astrid could breathe much easier than she had in the past couple of hours. A few dragons growled softly she passed, and it might have been intimidating to any non-Hooligans, those large

eyes glinting in the light of the wall sconces as scaly flesh dragged heavily across the ground. Astrid simply ran her hand over strange snouts, earning appreciative rumblings as she ambled over to Stormfly's stall.

Her Nadder perked up at the sight of her, leaning into Astrid's touch.

"Hey girl! Want to fly?" Astrid stroked along her dragon's jaw, grinning at the way Stormfly luxuriated in it. "I'll take that as a yes."

She sidled into the stall, taking her saddle down from its peg. It was a beautiful work of leather from a much happier time, older than any of the strife she felt. Stormfly held obediently still as Astrid fitted it to her, and thoughts of Stefnir intruded in on the moment—his possessiveness, suspicion, and the way he had been puzzled by a line of well-known poetry. Well, well-known to those bothering to learn such things. Stefnir did not seem to have much interest in the arts—a side of Astrid that found beauty and meaning in life beyond wealth, influence, and muscle.

She sighed heavily, patting her dragon. "How am I going to make this marriage work, Stormfly?" The Nadder squawked and Astrid smirked, shaking her head. "I wish I understood you. Maybe Hiccup could translate?" Her heart felt heavy as she led Stormfly out of her stall, wishing she had been clearer with her intentions, then Hiccup might be there with her.

A dismal thought swirled in her mind that, maybe, he had come to his senses and had the foresight to end whatever emotional affair they had started before it got out of hand. It was the right thing. The responsible thing. What Astrid should be focusing her energy on, instead of how to slip away from her fiancée for a rendezvous with another man.

Stanzas came together in her mind, giving voice to her dull mood. She would have to enjoy more intellectual pursuits in private, it seemed, for she was to be bound to a man who could not relate.

"Battle worn and weary, I welcome unrelenting night," she said, reciting her favorite poem as she readjusted and tightened the saddle. "I pray, my love, do not weep for me, for no longer must I fight. No sails seen in the distance to herald my return. I join the fallen in Valhalla, as my body now must burn. I lay upon this pyre, and the stars glint overhead—"

"I pray, waste not the time to search for me, for verily I am dead."

Astrid nearly yelped, and she whipped around to meet the curious gaze of a Night Fury. Stormfly was thrilled, bounding over to greet Toothless with all of her enthusiasm. But Astrid was unconcerned with the dragons, because Hiccup was there, as imprudent, shortsighted, bullheaded as she was. It was a small tether of dignity that kept her from launching herself into his arms with relief. She was not alone in her impetuosity.

"I was feeling smothered back there," she told him, blood rushing louder in her ears with every step toward her he took. "I thought

taking our dragons out might be nice. After that storm, I bet they're just dying toâ€¦" Hiccup just smiled and she realized he did not care about the reason. He did not need an explanation. There was no doubting her word or following it up with a series of probing questions. She had wanted to see him and he had complied, and there was no need to defend herself to him. "Truth is, I was beginning to think you decided to sensible."

Hiccup smirked, glancing down at the floor as he replied, "Common sense and I are not often on good terms." His eyes flickered back to her face as Toothless appeared at his shoulder, lightly nudging his rider with impatience. "Okay, okay bud." He climbed into his saddle.

Astrid pulled herself up, onto Stormfly's back, and waited for Hiccup and Toothless to take the lead, but the young man just gestured out into the night and said, "Milady."

She beamed at him, delighted to hear that endearment again. It really had been too long.

There was a line that they flirted with, whether it was flying side by side on their dragons or merely holding friendly conversation. They had definitely stepped a toe over it on Dragon Island. It was always there, unseen and undefined, but as they raced above the village Astrid wanted to cross itâ€”that last boundary. It was not wise, and she knew their relationship was doomed to spiral downward as soon as it got off the ground, but there was an ease to being with Hiccup. It was as if the past two years had never happened, and they were only continuing where they had left off. She laughed as Toothless cut her off, bit her lip as Stormfly dove toward the shoreline to entice the Night Fury into more daring competition.

The sea rippled as Toothless skimmed it, cutting the surface with the tip of his wing. The salty air tugged at her braid, loosening it and making it tangled and briny, but it was invigorating. Though she should have been in the Great Hall with her fiancÃ©e, basking in the glow of her engagement, it could not feel more right than flying with Hiccup. She was getting a taste of what her life needed to be, chasing after a Night Fury without care. All guilt was left behind in the stables.

"Hiccup!" she called over the rushing wind. He twisted in his saddle, gazing back at her. "Race you to the cove."

Toothless veered sharply and Astrid grinned, urging Stormfly after him. Her dragon's wings beat furiously behind her, waves turned into rocky cliff, which then were firstâ€”a jumbled mass in the darkness. The forests of Berk were long black fingers, reaching up to snag them. Toothless glided low over the trees in defiance of them, making branches rustle violently. Stormfly would not catch him, unless the Night Fury wanted to be caught. Hiccup used to let her win on occasion, but it had been years since there had been an honest race between them. He wanted to win and for once, Astrid was alright with losing. She soared into the cove after him, cheeks hurting from the assault of the wind and her prolonged smile. They were both wind-swept and breathless, dismounting their dragons with soft laughter.

"That was amazing," Astrid said, flattening the fly away strands of

her hair. "I needed that."

"I almost forgot what a real race felt like," Hiccup remarked. He did not bother the fight with his own hair as he strode toward her.

Then, they were standing too close, and that line was somewhere between them. Astrid could sense it, even stronger than the night before. She was thinking straighter, more aware of her close proximity to Hiccup. Dragon Island had been a flurry of pent up frustration finally set loose. Sensation had taken over everything, but the cove was different. Less desperate. She could look at Hiccup—_really_ look at him—and she grasped him by the elbow. Something innocuous to touch, to feel him truly there with her. Solid and as real as she was. He reached up and traced her braid with his fingers, capturing the end of it loosely in his palm. He stared at her, and that accursed line was dissolving with her inhibitions.

"Are you alright?" she asked. It was weak but it was all she could think to say to him, to measure how he was doing after her engagement became official—or was it to determine how he was doing with all of it? Their dishonesty.

He quirked an eyebrow. "I think I should be the one asking _you_ that. I'm not about to marry someone I don't like." He tugged at her braid, similar to Stefnir's habit, but decidedly different. Sweeter, with more concern than condescension.

"_Like_," Astrid scoffed. "I 'like' him just fine. That doesn't get me very far in our relationship, though."

There was a sadness in Hiccup—an aching readable on his face on her behalf. "And still, you'll marry him?" he asked, and his concern made her want to kiss him. Thank him for being the only soul who seemed to care.

"What choice do I have, Hiccup?" she responded, picking idly at her fingernails as she glowered at the dirt. "If I don't marry him, I'm disgracing my family. If I do marry him, I can't divorce him and—" her eyes met his slowly, her lips slightly parted, hung up on the words.

"Be with me?" he suggested, so calmly that it hardly seemed scandalous at all. "Is that—what you want?" There was something intense about him, deep in his gaze, which made her feel like the center of the universe.

She tossed her head back with a hollow laugh. "I'm beginning to think it hardly matters what I want."

"It matters to me," he replied, brow knitted. "Until you're _his_ wife, it matters to me and—|and afterwards, probably."

Afterwards? There it was again, the uncertainty of things to come and where they would land, coming down from foolish daydreaming.

"Hiccup, I don't know what I'm doing, here," she confessed, more helpless than she had ever felt. Able to spare them both greater

pain, yet simultaneously unable to keep herself from sprinting headlong for it. "This. Us. I know it's far better than where we were yesterday afternoon, butâ€¦I just don't know. You know as well as I do this is wrong."

"Yes, it isâ€"only because a few people decided we can't be together. It's isn't right or fairâ€" "

"No, but neither is this. To our families. To Stefnir. We don't even know where we're headed. It can't be any place good, butâ€¦I don't want to stop it, either." And so she was still determinedly selfish.

"Then, we won't. For however long we've got, we keep going." He gripped her by the arms and she leaned into him.

"Isn't that just reckless?" she asked, arms around his neck. Where was that line? She needed it to know how far she could push thingsâ€"when it was no longer okay.

"Of course it is, but when has that stopped us?"

Her lips brushed his, hesitating. She felt she at least owed him an apology, like she owed his father, her parents, the whole Svenson clan.

Before lucidity died in the shadow of lust, she wanted him to know she understood the weight of what they were doing, that it was her fault, and that she had dragged him needlessly into it. She did not know which was worse, causing him two years of heartache by pretending she was giddy in love with Stefnir, or putting him in the position of loving her illicitly. He was the heir to Berk, and he was caught in a disgraceful affair, so far beneath him.

She murmured, "I'mâ€¦I'm sorry, Iâ€" "

His hands dropped to her waist, pulling her flush against him. His breath was warm and it made her entire body thrum for him.

"Don't be," he said. "I'm not."

It would not last, his complacency. So, Astrid took advantage of it while she could and kissed him. It was not nearly as fervent as it had been the night before. It was slower, deeper. Strangely, more arousing. It was a commitment that they were both in it together and there was no line anymore.

7. Chapter 7

****A/N: **Ugh, sorry this is late by over an hour in my timezone. The last part took longer than expected and then happened. Anyway, here it is.**

Everyone got your Nutella to cry into? Got your spoons? Okay. Proceed.

I haven't proofread this yet because I am stupid tired. I will do it later. Probably. Sorry for typos.

* * *

><p>Astrid was keenly aware all eyes were on her as ambled through the village, carrying out her morning chores. It made her self-conscious and she rounded her shoulders, too aware of every movement she made feeling suddenly exaggerated. Normally left to her own devices, it was off-putting to be the center of attention when dragons were not involved. Races were one thing, but her participation in the sport had become less common as more domestic responsibilities called herâ€"learning to cook and sew. Be a wife befitting Stefnir Svenson. While she craved recognition during anything competitive, she was not used to chatter following her as she kept to herself. All of Berk got riled up for weddings, however, and she was to be the focus of the whole tragedy, smiling as she inwardly wept. There were congratulatory shouts from passersby as she fed the family chickens. She raised a hand, politely acknowledging their kindness, though she wished they would not. It was frustrating to be continually reminded of her dismal fate, beaten over the head with harsh reality whenever she came close to forgetting for one blissful moment.<p>

She stood up, closing the chicken coop. In her hands, she held a woven bowl with six brown, speckled eggs. The birds clucked as if they were protesting, fluffing their plume. Their heads jerked from one side to the other, considering Astrid towering over them, and the bowl felt heavy in her hands.

"Sorry ladies," she muttered. "It doesn't seem like there's much that's fair around here anymore."

She turned, leather strips of her skirt whipping heavily around her thighs. Her pauldrons jangled as she trudged through the mud, the ground still slick with the previous day's rainstorm. The moisture was beginning to evaporate as the low sun warmed Midgard. The rays refracted through the vapor to create a haunting mist in the morning light. Terrible Terrors cried from the rooftops, scurrying about while larger dragons glided overhead, carrying their riders off their daily work. Distant hammering echoed over the village, sporadic harmonies as more than one Hooligan erected banners for the coming Selection ceremony. The event was only a couple years old, the chief finding a way to form lasting traditions out of an evolving culture. Astrid had never bothered to ask how Hiccup felt about it all, but she suspected he probably had a hand in itâ€"dragons _were_ at the center of the ceremony. He likely had his father's reasoning memorized, and would recite it in an uncanny impersonation of Stoick the Vast if pressed.

Astrid smiled fondly, remembering the way he used to scowl and flail his handsâ€"the way he _still_ scowled and flailed his hands.

They had spent two hours secluded in the cove the night before, and she had grown giddy drunk off his lips, had wrapped herself warm and comfortable in his laugh. Side by side they lapped the pondâ€"she had lost count how many timesâ€"cramming two years' worth of dating into a short while. It was almost as if there had been no bitterness, no resentment._ Almost._ They were simply Hiccup and Astrid as they used to be, a little worn and trampled by a terrible misunderstanding, but still intact in spite of everything.

"It seems we still share a dangerous affinity for the ill-advised,"

he said, and he had pulled her close, hands politely still on her waist.

"I'm glad some things never change," she had replied, plucking idly at the lacing of his collar.

"Mm, yeah." His lips quirked into a wry smile. "Conspiring, sneaking off to do the wrong thing. It just seems so 'us', don't you think?"

She smirked, and had pressed her face into the crook of his neck, soothed by the warmth of his skin and thrumming of his pulse in a steady rhythm—“not bounding, but relaxed.

"Only because I can't find my common sense. Seems I can't shake whatever attraction I have for your strange, awkward, dragon-crazy self," she told him, closing her eyes. The rise and fall of his chest against hers had been pleasant.

His arms came around her and he kissed the crown of her head, saying, "I'm glad some things never change, milady—"

But that was the night before, away from Berk and prying eyes where she could be Hiccup's woman, entirely. That morning, she was back in the village and so she was Stefnir's intended, supposedly devoted. She was willingly entering the union between the Hoffersons and Svensons to everyone else's knowledge. In her two-year act to convince Stefnir and herself that she actually could be happy with the circumstances, everyone had come to believe they were indeed a love-match. She did not know another man's touch, nor the taste of anyone's tongue. It was her fiancé that inspired rushes of desire, not flashes of green eyes and russet hair.

That was what she had to convince everyone else with such regularity she was exhausted from it—like a single stone beat upon by relentlessly churning waves. For what was to be gained by admitting she did not love Stefnir? The anger and disappointment of her in-laws? Nothing would change save for the good rapport she enjoyed with her soon-to-be family. Nothing but more pain and frustration would come from the truth. So, she loved Stefnir. Deeply. That was the only truth that mattered to anybody, and that was the truth she publicly maintained—but it was weighing her down. She worried she might not have anything left in her to appear overjoyed on her wedding day. Insincerity was so draining.

She sighed heavily, glancing up at the large domicile in front of her adorned with carvings of Monstrous Nightmares painted blood-red. The stylized dragon heads had once served as testament to prowess on the battlefield—a representation of beasts slain. She was gazing at the Jorgenson household, but the Nightmares' likeness had become a statement of their family's bond with that particular breed of dragon. It was not such an uncommon thing. The Nadder design above her own family's door was to be viewed as respect for their dragons, and not the poor creature her father had killed as a rite of passage.

Her fist was poised to knock when an obnoxious voice called down to her from the rooftop with ringing familiarity. "I'm surprised you remember where I live!"

>She rolled her eyes, shifting from one foot to the other as Snotlout

peered down, his eyebrows raised in mild interest.<p>

"I'm just here to deliver eggs, Snotloutâ€"deliver the eggs and collect some yak's milk, and I'll be on my way."

He scoffed, climbing down the ladder with a hammer in his fist. "Yeah, it would be something like that."

Astrid's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?" Normally unconcerned with his asininites, she could not help but hear the underlying accusation.

He slid down the last few rungs of the ladder, feet hitting the ground with a noisy squelch of the mud. "I mean, it's just more of the sameâ€"your old friends hardly matter to you anymore. You've got your new circle and that's cool, but don't pretend like we haven't been replaced."

She frowned. "People aren't broken hatchets or worn out furs, Snotlout. They can't be replaced."

He shrugged. "Fine. Forgotten, then. Cast asideâ€"whatever you prefer to call it, Astrid. It makes no difference." He pounded on the front door. "MA! EGGS!"

"I'm getting married," she replied defensively, her stomach knotting at the thought. "What did you expect? I'll have other things to worry about than goofing off with the rest of you."

"I don't know what I expectedâ€"only that you wouldn't stop being Astridâ€"but what do I know about it, really? It's not like we're close."

"We areâ€"!" She stopped herself, lip trembling until she bit the inside of it gently. There was no "are" any longer, only "was". Being deceptively happy had become a full time endeavor, consuming time she would have put into the academy and its shenanigans. She felt the weight of each syllable as she continued, "We all have to grow up sometime, Snotlout."

"Huh. Well, if you're the example of 'growing up' then I don't think I want to," he snipped.

Astrid scowled. She was going fire back, drawing him into a volley of immature griping, like they once did, but the front door opened and Snotlout's mother emerged holding a ceramic jug in her hands. A short woman, forever dooming her son's own height, she was capable of intense passion, cheering as loud as any spectator during dragon races. Astrid did not want to see that fire directed at her for the nasty comeback she had planned for Snotlout. Mothers were fearsome creatures. A fact she happened to know all too well.

"Oh, Astrid!" Snoutlout's mother chimed, gazing at her with that well-meaning that was grating on Astrid's sanity. "Good te see ye! Congratulations on yer engagement, by the way! Yeh'll make such a lovely bride."

Snotlout shuffled past his mother with a loud, "HA!"

Astrid shared the sentiment, though she smiled brightly and offered

her bowl of eggs. "Thank you, Mrs. Jorgenson. I'mâ€|well, Iâ€|I can't wait." Her grin faltered only a little bit, unnoticed, as she and Snotlout's mom exchanged goods carefully. A slow and awkward hand-off.

"Neither can the village! It all anybody's talkin' about!"

Astrid laughed halfheartedly, cradling the jug of yak's milk to her chest. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"Well, truth be told, we've all been waitin' fer a while, now! I'm surprised it took so long with the way that boy is mad fer ye." Snotlout's mother stepped back, lingering in the threshold with her hand on the door. "Ye let me know if there is anythin' I can do te help with the preparations. The gods know I might not have an opportunity fer a while yet." She cast a sidelong glance at her son, edging by her again with his hammer still in hand.

Astrid nodded, holding her smile until the door shut completely, even as Snotlout took care to bump her shoulder as he passed. Her face returned to its much more comfortable dispiritedness as she turned for home.

"Well, thanks for stopping by," Snotlout said sarcastically, and she did not look at him. "I would say 'see ya later' butâ€|"

"No," she called back, making sure not to slosh the milk too much as she strode away. "I don't think that you will."

There was no half-witted response shouted back to make things familiar, to make them alrightâ€|just the nonchalant beating of a hammer against a rooftop.

* * *

><p>Stoick the Vast cleared his throat pointedly and Hiccup bristled, unbuckling his flight suit as he kept his back turned to his father. He could feel that gaze boring into him though, willing him to be more cooperativeâ€|but that had never worked before. One could not simply wish the hard-headed Haddock men into compliance, so it was equally fruitless for Hiccup to hope his father would be deterred from further jabs at conversation. Still, Hiccup said nothing to cut the heavy silence punctured by the occasional clinking of his buckles and the popping fire in the hearth.<p>

He began peeling off leather layers when the chief finally spoke. A foreboding, "We need te talk, son."

Hiccup grimaced. Those words stung like icy sea spray, tiny little needles pricking him all over.

"Aboutâ€|?" he really hated to ask.

"After the Hofferson-Svenson weddin', I'll be travelling te Thor's Temple on Helgafell fer the solstice. Yer te accompany me this year. There are rituals ye must learn, offerin's te make on behalf of our people."

"Fine," he shrugged, gathering his flight gear neatly in his arms. The news was not nearly as bad as he had anticipatedâ€|but his father

was still staring at him intently, squaring his shoulders in a way that made him impossibly broader. Hiccup tensed and the chief's mustache twitched, looking poised for an argument. He quirked an eyebrow. "What else isâ€|at Thor's Temple?"

"Other chieftains," Stoick replied, thumbs hooking in his belt. He puffed his chest slightly.

"Ah." Hiccup's fingernails dug into his leather. There was a spreading tightness in his chest. It was not panicked, but a slow realization of the inevitable.

>His father did not quite meet his eye as he added, "Their wives and childrenâ€|daughters, some of 'em."<p>

"Right."

Daughters. Eligible for marriage and looking for a suitable match, no doubt. He, the heir to the moderately wealthy Isle of Berk and the rumored Dragon Conqueror would be in high demand. Certainly not for his appearance. He had land and titles, reputation and means. A political vein of gold to be tapped and bled for his assets while he manipulated his married tribe for Berk's benefit. Always a game of power and resources he was not keen to play.

"Ye are te choose a bride while we are there," Stoick said with an unnecessary tone of finality, still expecting that argument that would not come.

Hiccup had nothing left to challenge, no more delusional hope buried in the deepest recesses of his heart that things might work out between him and Astrid. She would be Stefnir's wife before too long, and they were destined to fizzle out once more, though not by their choosing. Kisses would become nods of acknowledgment. Embraces would turn to pats on the back and friendly blows to the shoulder. Admission of love would only be lingering glances, torn away before others noticed the mutual desire racing through the air between them. That was to be themâ€|a lifetime of regret haunted by the what-ifs. He was finally tasting Astrid's affections only to lose her, holding fast to the time they had together as trickled through his grasp like cupped water. He was feeding his unhealthy obsession with her, though their ending had been written before they ever really got started.

He could not dispute the need for a bride of his own. It was his duty to Berk. He did not expect he would be chief in the near future, but distractions would help as they had done for the past two years while he had been fooling himself. It would not fix things, but a wife might take his mind off of Astrid from time to timeâ€|until he was wrapped around a strange woman in the darkness, feeling a new set of curves his hands would never completely accept. Yearning for smooth, pale skin over toned muscles of the supple frame of his fantasies. Or when he was moving over his wife's body, hearing moans below him that offended his ears with their foreign tone. And when he kissed her lips, he would try desperately not to think of the way Astrid tasted on his tongue, suppressing those memories until he all but forgot them.

Yes. A wife would be a _wonderful_ thingâ€|his inner monologue was more dismal than his father would ever know.

"Okay," he answered, resigned. Stoick's eyebrow rose in surprise and Hiccup sighed heavily. "That won't be a problem. You're going to have a hand in it, I assume?"

Stoick's posture relaxed a little. "Of course. There are tribes to avoid. I can't let you marry the wrong sort."

"Who's the _right _sort?"

Hiccup turned for the stairs, the stump of his left leg aching sharply where it met his prosthesis. He winced, hiding it from his father or the man would fuss, tender-hearted though he was roughly the size of a bear. Hiccup would have to massage it himself before he made his way to the smithy, in the privacy of his bedroom. He would only feel marginally better for his poor effortsâ€"manageable, at best. It had been such a long time since someone much more gifted had put healing hands on him.

The chief elaborated, "Erling the Stalwart, of the Vandals of the Vale, he has a daughter. Hertha, if I recall. They are the 'right' sort, more crops and livestock than they know what to do with. It would make surviving the winters a good deal easier."

Each step was difficult as Hiccup climbed the stairs to his room. Painful jolts up the lengths of his leg joined by a dull throb that was far too familiar to be distressing. "Sounds like a smart match. I'll keep that in mind when I meet them."

"You're handlin' thisâ€"better than I thought." His father was _almost _apologetic for the lack of faith, and Hiccup was _almost _forgiving.

"Hey, now. I'm not completely unreasonable, dad," he said, pausing halfway up the stairs. "A political marriage just makes senseâ€"isn't that what you've been telling me?" He smiled, but it was devoid of any true humor. "Besides Iâ€"I have nothing else going for me."

* * *

><p>The smithy drew nearer with every hesitant step. Astrid's heart was racing and her ears were ringing for reasons other than the reverberating strike of metal on metal. That sound used to be a comfort, an incessant pounding that made her stomach flutter, then it had become melancholic song filling her with sadness and regret until, finally, it was a warningâ€"like the distant roar of a Skrill. She did not want to go in the shop not as she was. Not in the height of her acting, strolling through Berk with Stefnir.<p>

"Do we have to do this right now?" Astrid asked, trying not to seem too reluctant as her fiancÃ©e led her along. Her arm was looped through his, loosely. Halfheartedly.

"I'll be painting in the Great Hall and hanging banners until dusk. Now's the only opportunity I have," Stefnir answered pleasantly, curling his arm to give hers an affectionate squeeze.

She was no closer to being convinced. "We can come back tomorrow, or next week. Earlier in the morning whenâ€"

"Next week? With the Selection festival? That would be putting it off

for too long. We'll be married the following week and these things can't be rushed," he explained, rubbing her back in what was meant to be a soothing gesture.

>Astrid only clenched her jaw, trying to smother her burgeoning ire.<p>

He was doing it againâ€”speaking with a condescending tone like she lacked the capacity to understand otherwise. Like she was a child, not knowledgeable about the ways of the worldâ€”his world. The only world that ever seemed to matter in his eyes. It was a place in which Astrid was a meek and dutiful wife, reliant on him completely. Whatever version of her nightmares he found solace in, she was eternally grateful the gods had not made it so.

"I see your point," she muttered, trying not to settle her gaze on the tall, slim figure scurrying about the forge with a confidence he seldom possessed elsewhere, matched only in the skies, on the back of his dragon.

Astrid did not trust herself to look directly at him. Not with Stefnir there. Not even as her betrothed called out and rich green eyes glanced up, freezing her galloping heart with both a thrill and dread. It was a cruel thing how readily she noticed Hiccup's most handsome features at the most inopportune times. Like the way his lips parted slightly in surprise and his long fingers curled tighter around his blacksmith's hammer. The way his hair fell damp and heavy against his forehead was not inspiring wholesome thoughts, not when his skin glistened with a veneer of soot and sweat, and not as beads of perspiration trickled teasingly down the column of his neck.

They were too close, even at a respectable distance. As long as Stefnir was there, simply being in Hiccup's presence felt indecent. Astrid stared past him into the blazing forge while it warped the air around with its unrelenting heat, making it dance with sweltering passion.

"Stefnir," Hiccup said. It was not as much as greeting as a declarationâ€”a statement they had been noticed. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I have a couple of jobs I need done." Stefnir pulled his arm free from Astrid's so he could wrap it around her waist, pulling her into his side. "For the wedding, of course." He lit up as Astrid dimmed.

She scrunched her eyes closed, taking a steadying breath. Her face burned like a smithy ember and she wanted to hide behind her hands. She could not play the part of excited bride-to-be in front of Hiccup. It was shameful. She could not smile at him with a tender hand on Stefnir's chest. She could not giggle and feign interest in a wedding she did not want. Hiccup knew to the truth. Hel, he was complicit in it.

Her eyes flickered to him for only a moment, but he was not looking at her. He was staring at Stefnir with that same unsettling placidity that was once reserved for Astrid's pestering visits, concealing a deeper well of emotion she had not known was there.

"Ah. Well, Gobber can definitely help you withâ€”"

Stefnir, squeezed Astrid tighter and there was something predatory in his smirk as he said, "I wanted to ask you."

Hiccup's eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second and Astrid could almost see the frantic thoughts whizzing about inside his head. He pursed his lips and gazed down at the hammer in his hand and fidgeted, absentmindedly tapping the head lightly against his other palm.

"For what, exactly?" he asked, watching the tool fall repeatedly gentle into his open hand. Astrid almost missed the words over the Gobber's background noise—"loud banging against an anvil with the occasional grunt.

"The ceremonial sword and the bands," Stefnir answered, and he was smug. Too smug.

Astrid tried to pull away from him, pushing off from his broad chest, but he just captured her hand in his, bringing it to his lips to kiss before holding it tightly over his tunic. It was then that Hiccup made eye contact for the briefest moment, and Astrid could see the twitch of his jaw in his narrow face.

"Lundgren is a better jeweler than I am," Hiccup stated. "That kind of thing is not my specialty. Wouldn't it be better to ask someone experienced in making rings?"

Stefnir released Astrid and she took a silent breath of relief. She turned toward Hiccup ready to side with him, but he dissuaded her with a barely perceptible shake of his head. She was still Stefnir's, in that moment. She was an engaged woman. She did not want the chief's son—"not there, in plain view of Gobber and her fiancé. She bit the inside of her cheek, gazing up at the ceiling in muted frustration as Stefnir strode around the shop, admiring children's saddle in various stages of completion.

"Lundgren embellishes the base design which he's fashioned—"makes pretty necklaces and strings beads together, and the like," he replied. "No, you actually can craft them, and I've seen the work you do." He fingered an intricate design carved into the leather of one saddle. He glanced up at Hiccup, and it was a challenge. "There's no one better."

Hiccup was determinedly calm, jerking his head in Gobber's direction as the older man hobbled around, oblivious. "He taught me everything I know—" "

Stefnir folded his arms, sitting back on a workbench strewn with Hiccup's incredible designs, taking little care what he sat on.

"But you're better," he repeated.

Astrid felt the clenching muscles in her legs, goading her to dash over to her betrothed and shove him off of those intricate plans meticulously drawn on parchment. Stefnir did not know the time that went into those drawings. He found the chief's son an irritation, and so was everything related to him.

Hiccup did not protest. He did not react and there was a power in it. He was unruffled by Stefnir's games. It was his own subtle

challengeâ€”a dare for Stefnir to make him snap, and a promise he would not.

"And the sword?" he asked, turning his back with a cool abruptness Astrid could feel. Stefnir did not seem offended, unfamiliar with Hiccup's more understated disrespect that Astrid had so often received.

"I thought I might determine the design as it will be mine anyway. I don't think the bride will mind, in this case." Stefnir followed him like a dragon toying with its meal.

He shot Astrid a debonair smile and she tried to return it in a false show of support, equally simpering until Hiccup cast a sidelong glance at the both of them. She could almost hear the popping of his knuckles as his fist choked the ball-peen hammer, and she felt a nauseating wave of guilt.

"I'm sure Astrid's capable of deciding that for herself," Hiccup retorted, hands falling a bit too heavily atop his work station. "She's standing right there if you'd care to ask her."

"Hiccupâ€”" Astrid tried to slide in an apologyâ€”caution him to check his tone lest something damning slipâ€”but Stefnir spoke over her.

"Will you do it or not?" he demanded, sidling over to Astrid. He brushed her bangs back as he studied Hiccup, and Astrid just barely recoiled.

Hiccup glared down at the leather spread out in front of him, hands smoothing over it while doing no real work. "It's not that I wouldn't love the honor, but I'm swamped with saddle orders for the Selection next week. I can't take on any new projects. You can ask Gobber, though."

Stefnir scoffed, pulling Astrid in close while Hiccup pretended he was busy. She tensed as his rough lips claimed hers with, what she believed, was an intentionally loud kiss.

Astrid's eyes were wide open, and she noticed Hiccup's shoulders hunch. He was also placing the majority of his weight on his right foot, something he did whenever his amputation was bothering him, and she wanted to fall to her knees and share in his suffering, thereby easing his-hurting as he hurt, because Stefnir was dangling her in front of him like a fish to a dragon and the injustice of it all was too much.

"What's this I hear about some fancy weddin' trinkets?" Gobber interjected, limping over to them alight with the prospect of getting paid.

Stefnir was taken aback at the smith's sudden interest, unwillingly swept into a conversation with the older man about the goods to be forged and it was a mercy. Astrid's eyes could meet Hiccup's while her fianc e was distracted. She could freely pass him looks of embarrassment, shame, and regret. He had to know she had not meant for any of the torment, that it was Stefnir's doing. She could only mouth "I'm sorry" while Hiccup sighed heavily. He was worn by the spiteful badgering and made ill by all of the posturing. His eyes

where pleading for a comfort Astrid could not yet give him. In the daytime, she was not his no matter how ardently she ached to be.

"You're price-gouging," Stefnir complained, and Astrid snapped back to attention, nearly struck by a dismissive wave of his hand, invisible when her fianc e was focused on monetary concerns.

"I'm doin' nothin' of the sort," Gobber insisted, glaring, defensive of his business practices, "but if ye don't want te pay fer my services, ye can go about making yer rings yourself, and use yer beat-up sword ye never bring by fer maintenance."

Stefnir's lip curled and he huffed, "Unbelievable."

Gobber scratched his chin, dirty fingertips leaving black streaks among his whiskers. "Tell ye what. Because I am feeling so generous, I will throw in a complimentary sword-workin' at yer leisure."

"That's unnecessary. I have a whetsone."

The older Viking chuckled, patronizing. His gut jiggled visibly through holes in his filthy tunic. "Ah, that's nothin' like givin' the entire blade the once-over, eh? Checkin' fer wear andâ€"

"Fine," Stefnir interrupted. "That will work. When will everything be done?"

Astrid sneered at his back. He was being rude. Impatient, because Gobber was not his focus. Striking a deal with the man was not goal. Gobber was a means to an end. Someone to render services, beneath him as imparted by his mother, no doubt.

The blacksmith just took it in stride.

"Ah, yeh don't rush beauty, lad. It will be done in time fer the weddin', don't ye worry. I will come te ye."

Stefnir made a noise of agreement in his throat, rounding on his true objective. "Hiccup, I wouldlike to commission a new saddle for my bride, after the Selection of course."

Hiccup did not even flinch when addressed, but Astrid was incensed for him. It was a superfluous task in a quest for superiority.

"What are youâ€"my saddle is _fine!_" she hissed, gripping Stefnir's arm like a vice.

He did not respond to her, merely prying her fingers loose and asking the other young man, "Is that doable?"

He was fixated on Hiccup and every nuance of reaction and every inflection. His brown eyes were eager, searching for something to latch on to, something that meant he had won, and Astrid brought her hand to her mouth, shaking with barely contained fury.

"Yeah, sure. No problem," Hiccup answered evenly. "I will get right on that once I return from Helgafell."

Stefnir's lips quirked with satisfaction and he placed a commanding hand on the small of Astrid's back, steering her out of the shop though her heels dug into the moist ground. She tried to peer back at Hiccup as they left, but they rounded a corner and she started on her intended.

"What the Hel was that?" she snapped, tearing away from him. Her chest inflated with outrage.

"What do you mean?" Stefnir asked, mocking and gratingly pleased with himself. Amused, clearly claiming triumph in whatever competition supposedly had taken place in the smithy.

"You were trying to rile him upâ€"make him jealous! _Why?_" She was angry and disgusted, but she might as well have said nothing for all the good it did her.

"I was simply placing an important work order," Stefnir shrugged with an innocent façade betrayed by the haughty lift in his brow. "If he wants to feel upset about it, let him, though what give him the right? There's no getting around that we're togetherâ€"we belong together. I hope he's starting to wake up to that."

He ran his hands over her bare arm and her skin crawled in the wake of his touch. She had about a dozen words she wanted to call him, none of which frequented happy relationships. She held on to his forearms, leaning in so maybe he would believe she was interrogating him with a genuine curiosity instead.

"Why do you care?" She nearly stumbled on the words, "He's nothing to me. You know that."

Stefnir captured her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her face up with a dominance that threatened to send Astrid in a rage before the vows were ever exchanged. A lifetime of submission or screaming were her options, and she would choose the raw vocal cords if need be.

"Because you're mine," he told her, grinning as his mouth brushed hers. The warmth of his breath made her want to pull away.

She did not balk and Stefnir grew bolder, ghosting his lips over her cheek._ It used to be pleasant_, she told herself. There was once something redeemable in his affections that she needed to find again, because there was plenty of daylight left and he had no reason not to kiss her.

"Right. Everyone already knows that, so why do you feel threatened by Hiccup? Why can't you just leave him alone?"

Her hands came to his biceps, running over the hard muscle because it was a somewhat loving touch in a harmless enough place. Her fingertips stroked lightly as if his skin would turn caustic with more pressure.

"People thought you were his once, and I want to put that to rest. I want _him_ to put it to rest," Stefnir explained.

His reason was petty. He wanted a cockfight he could win and Astrid

was repulsed by his inherent need to squash anyone remotely threateningâ€”though what could she and Hiccup ever become, really? There was nothing to be jealous ofâ€”or rather, they would ultimately be nothing to be jealous of. It was pointless. It was the same swagger she had repelled from Snotlout before Hiccup's smile was ever a sweet thought in her head.

"He already has," Astrid remarked. "I've told you that he and I not close anymore, so what were you hoping to accomplish in there?"

She exhaled tremulously as full lips dropped to her neck, teasing a wonderfully sensitive spot Hiccup had found the night before. She was pulled flush against a solid body, less familiar and largely unexplored. She felt a twinge of self-loathing at the tiny voice whispering how good it felt physically, though her heart was about ready to forsake her.

"I want to keep him from making the mistake of hope. You don't see the way he looks at you sometimes." His hands were possessive on her hips, kneading too harshly. "Really, I was doing him a service becauseâ€”in a couple weeksâ€”"

He chuckled against her neck and Astrid felt her insides twist at the implication. To further emphasize his point, a hand cupped her bottom through her leather skirt, fingers strategically situated between the spikes.

And suddenly he was being much too forward, though for two years he had exercised restraint.

Her voice was not so much pleading as it was exhausted. Defeated.

"Stefnir, don'tâ€”"

"I can't waitâ€”" he murmured, nipping at her neck softly and, to Astrid, his teeth were daggers.

"Hey, hey! Save it for the wedding night lovebirds!" shouted passersby, chortlingâ€”because she was a spectacle. _They_ were a spectacle. The whole gods damned thing was Berk's latest entertainment.

There was only one person who understood why her fingernails were digging into her fiancÃ©'s flesh, and why she stood so rigidly in his embrace. One person was her escape. The remedy for her noxious circumstancesâ€”and he was walking by the smithy window where he could see everything.

He froze, the labored heaving of his chest obvious from where she stood, and a flash of pain rippled between them. Stefnir's tongue was on her neck but her eyes were locked on Hiccup, locked on her. Somewhere, more tribesmen heckled, all in good fun, and Astrid closed her eyes wanting to melt away. Under her lids, there was a gathering wetness but she would not cry. To the observer she was actually enjoying herself

Because it was still daylight.

8. Chapter 8

****A/N: ****In the course of revamping this story, the content became more mature. This fic is M-rated from here on out.

* * *

><p>Hiccup had never felt worseâ€”not in the two years he spent believing Astrid could not care less about him as he pretended he could not care less about her. That had been a different kind of despair. He had not believed Astrid was mutually suffering, so his own loneliness was tolerable. It had not stung nearly as much when she told him she was engaged, nor did he feel as intense an urge to vomit as when he had seen Stefnir with his hands on her. His mouth on her. There was a time it would have inspired nothing but a furious jealousy in the pit of Hiccup's stomach, but he would have reined it in, squashed it down, breathed and reminded himself Astrid was not his. Only, that was not the way of things any longer. It tore at him like dragons' fangs to watch her endure the affections of a man she did not love, to meet her eye as Stefnir kissed her neck, seeing the regret, the disgust, and a helplessness play across her face, so atypical for a girl so fierce.<p>

Hiccup had held her gaze while Stefnir unwittingly took advantage of her sense of duty. He had been her lifeline, staying with her through the entire thing, reassuring her with the intensity of his stare, helping to shoulder her discomfort with his clenched jaw and the cracking knuckles of his hands, balling into tight fists. Astrid's eyes snapped shut, but Hiccup remained rooted by the smithy window. He would not leave her to suffer alone while Stefnir made her squirm and onlookers heckled them. It must have been a dark and terrible place she was in, and Hiccup could practically hear her silent screaming, reverberating in his bones and drawing short, heaving breaths from him.

Something aggressive gathered beneath his skin like billowing clouds flashing with lightning. It was a roll of thunder, growing ever louder like it might burst from him in an unstoppable yell as he lobbed his ball-peen hammer at Stefnir Svenson's head. It would have been involuntary at that point, a quick jerk of his arm that sent the blacksmithing tool flying through the air with every ounce of anger that could be packed into his wiry frame.

Hiccup did not condone violence. He abhorred it under most circumstances, but if his own misery was not enough to incite him to blows, his pacifistic tendencies had fallen to the wayside for Astrid's public degradation.

That image had been seared into his brain for the rest of the day and well into the eveningâ€”Stefnir wrapped around Astrid, and her look of utter revulsion and shame as she silently endured. She had cracked her eye open at one point, casting Hiccup an apologetic grimace, shaking her head just barely to placate him, to discourage him from action they would both later regret. Stefnir had eventually stopped, probably after a minute or two that felt like it dragged on for an eternity. He led Astrid along by a commanding grip on her wrist, and Hiccup was left in the shop, shoulders hunched, body tense, dragging his trembling hand over his face with a bracing inhale.

She was his, and Stefnir had her.

Correction. She was not his, but he wanted her.

"Ye alrigh'? Ye look like yer goin' te be sick," Gobber spoke up, casually, with only the mildest concern.

Hiccup had shrugged and returned to the saddles in progress, quietly seething and channeling his frustration into the intensity with which he worked, fast and livid, carving into the rich leather with a cathartic fury. Gobber limped around, largely ignored, as Hiccup dwelled on Astrid's pain and how much he would love to use her betrothed as 'Toothless' target practice, only be hit with the nagging realization he no right. It was a fact circulating through his brain every time he grew too incensed. Stefnir, that repugnant, pompous beast of a young man had the rightâ€”he had every right. Occasionally, Hiccup crouched down at this workbench, hands clasped and resting on the wooden surface, and he buried his face into the bend of his arm.

"My leg," he had half-lied to keep Gobber from asking too many questions. The limb was bothering him-one of the "bad" days.

His swirling inner monologue of outrage and self-admonishment had carried him into the evening, until he could return home and trudge up the stairs to the solitude of his bedroom. He had barely looked up when his father greeted him, replying with a halfhearted grunt of acknowledgment. He swiped a candle from the table before climbing the stairs, not energy left in him for small talk. Everything ached, especially his stump.

Toothless was excited to see him, perking up and warbling happily enough to bring a feeble smile to Hiccup's lips. He set the candle on the drawing table beside his bed, bathing the room in a dim, amber glow.

"Hey bud," he murmured, stroking the Night Fury's jaw as a scaly snout pressed into his cheek. "I missed you, too."

Toothless crooned, nuzzling him, flashing his gums. His thick, heavy tail curled in a wide, protective semicircle on the floor with Hiccup at the center. It was like a hug without real contact, and a gesture of affection unaccompanied by heartache. He had forgotten what that felt like.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to fly today," Hiccup sighed, patting Toothless. "Gobber's trying to work me to death as punishment for skipping out the forge."

He stepped over the Night Fury's tail, chuckling softly as the dragon tried to trip him with it. A couple of clumsy hops and he caught his balance, dropping onto the edge of his bed with a soft, weary exhale, trying to expel all the unpleasantness that had been stewing in his chest.

It was an added relief to take the weight of his left leg, which had been throbbing for a while, dull but persistent.

Floor boards creaked as Toothless ambled over, leaving his stone slab to be of more comfort. He lied down in front of the bed as a loyal hound might, resting his large, flat head across Hiccup's lap with a

huff and the rasp of scales against leather. His weight was oppressive, but Hiccup had nothing left in him with which to protest—he did not have the will to push Toothless away. The dragon was the one relationship he had that was blissfully simple, and he cherished Toothless for it.

"I feel old, bud. Old and weathered and young and stupid, all at the same time," Hiccup droned. Toothless responded with a rumble in his throat that Hiccup felt clearer than he heard, vibrating down his legs as powerful jaws slackened atop his thighs. He put his hand on warm, smooth scales, fingertips gliding over tiny bumps and ridges he knew almost as well as his own skin. "I know you don't understand what's going on but it's nice to pretend that you do."

There was a light pressure on his back, startling at first, but as tiny claws scurried up his spine, Hiccup smirked. Large, protrubent eyes met his, a Terrible Terror perched on his shoulder—his other dragon, not quite as precious as Toothless, but still very much cared for.

"I haven't forgotten about you, Sharpshot." Hiccup scratched him beneath the chin.

But the tiny dragon did not seem interested in affection. He was chattering away, sharp nails digging into Hiccup's flesh through the fibers of his tunic. His tail writhed about excitedly, dragging through Hiccup's hair and plucking a few strands by the root.

"Ow! Sharpshot! What-?" Hiccup winced, shrugging the Terror off.

Toothless raised his head, growling at the smaller dragon, but Sharpshot merely hovered in the air ignoring both his human and the Night Fury. He flew tight circles around Hiccup's head, not nearly as small as a gnat but every bit as irritating.

"What is it?" Hiccup asked, reaching up to capture the Terror as the dragon made another pass in front of his face. He cradled Sharpshot in his arms much like one would hold a housecat, that whip of a tail coiling like a serpent around his forearm.

It was then that he heard it, the scratching on the window frame. His heart gave a nasty jolt as something small and reptilian scurried into his room. He craned his neck to get better look, but nothing moved in the shadows. It was an unnerving silence apart from Toothless's steady breathing and Sharpshot's little grunts. He waited for a darting figure or glowing eyes to peer out from shapeless darkness dancing across his walls in time with the flickering candlelight.

But there was nothing, and he held his breath.

He was not afraid. It was a dragon, he had no doubt, but whose was it and why was it in his house? There were a dozen scenarios he could think of, all of them negative since his brain seemed to enjoy wallowing in a state of perpetual glumness. Maybe the Svensons were calling him out? Maybe Astrid was writing him to tell him their love affair was off? Two possibilities equally as likely. His stomach sank with an anticipatory dread.

"Hello?" he called, hoping to stir the beast from hiding.

His bed groaned, though he had not moved, and he felt the weight of something settling into the furs beside him. He glanced down to find bulbous yellow eyes staring back at him with an uneven blink of membranous lids.

"Odin's balls!" Hiccup yelped with a start, scooting back from the intruder.

It was a Terrible Terror, blue, and as stealthy as a longship sailing on a calm sea. It had been two years since Hiccup at dealt with the dragon, but he knew that faceâ€"in fact, he knew just about every dragon on Berk and to whom it belonged.

The effects of a nearly eidetic memory.

"Sneaky!" the Terror was delight to be recognizedâ€"or perhaps it was pleased to have found the right person, having kept away from the Haddock household for so long? With a happy cry, the dragon scrambled into his lap. Between Sneaky, Sharpshot, and Toothless, Hiccup felt smothered. "W-what are you doing here?"

The little dragon just purred, but Hiccup saw the scroll tied to a leg, conspicuous against azure scales. His mouth went dry, knowing whose fingers had knotted that parchment in place, his mind reeling from the multitude of distressing things it might say.

He set Sharpshot aside, the Terror curling up in his blanket like he owned it, far too pampered to sleep on the floor most nights. Hiccup had been too doting, overjoyed to have another dragon in the house. He had been permissive of Sharpshot's bad habits when he had first brought him home.

It was a different story for Terrible Terror in his lap, though. Sneaky held still with remarkable obedience as Hiccup deftly freed the note from his legâ€"disciplined in a manner that spoke volumes of Astrid's training style. He found it in himself to smirk at the thought, her kneeling down, exasperated from hours of trying to get the naturally fidgety Terror to hold still.

His face fell as he unfurled the scroll in his hands, feeling them prickly with nerves as if the parchment was made of needles. It read:

Hiccup,

I am coming over. See you soon. Leave your window open. Do not reply.

-Astrid

Of all the things he expected Astrid's note might say, that had not been on the list.

His brow furrowed and he scanned the tidy scrawl again, neat, though the exaggerated tilt of the runic script led him to believe it was written hastily. He blinked. He read over the words one more time, then the fog seemed to clear from his head, cut by a white-hot knife of panic.

"Baldr's ghost!" he hissed, leaping to his feet.

Sneaky growled, flapping his wings grudgingly as he was thrown from Hiccup's lap. Toothless recoiled, ear nubs erect, as Hiccup streaked past him making a beeline for the window. His heart was frenzied, watching a familiar figure slink between houses, given away only by the moonlight gleaming in her hair. She would duck into the shadows if anyone passed by, but it was late and most of Berk was either drinking itself into a stupor in the Great Hall or tucked away for the night. She went unnoticed, scaling the hill with the grace of a cat, equally as noiseless with her footfalls in the grass.

She gazed up at him, smiling and he was frozen, at a loss of what to do or say. There was some odd role reversal at play and he tried to process the absurdity of it.

"I'm coming up!" she whispered.

"We can't be doing this. Are you crazy?" he found his voice, gripping the window sill until the edge bit into his palms, ensuring him she was not some late night hallucination. "There's the cove, or-"

But she was crazy, dragging over the ladder that often remained propped against the rear of the house—easy access for repairing damage to the roof caused by Toothless's occasional overzealousness.

"You shouldn't be doing this!" Hiccup insisted as she climbed the rungs after one last check for prying eyes.

It was effortless for her swing into his room, closing the shutters behind her. He wanted her to stay, a large part of him was thrilled to see her, but there was a whole new level of brazen stupidity in carrying on right above his father.

"Now you're having doubts?" she teased, though there was a hint of insecurity in her playful jab.

"I've had my doubts, but I'll be damned if I ever listen to them," he said. "That'd be way too prudent of me."

He swept his hand down his face, feeling the full physical and emotional strain of the day. He was worn by recurring mental images of Stefnir kissing her possessively, and everything seemed to ache from the hours in the smithy.

"What are you doing here?" he asked wearily, trying not to notice her loose sleeping tunic and the way it hung on her body—he was failing. Realizing how standoffish he sounded, he amended the question. "This is too risky, Astrid. What could be worth it?"

There was something ridiculous to it all—the way she had come to his window like lovers of song and romantic verses—but it was eclipsed by how inadvisable it was to rendezvous in the village. In one of their houses, no less. All it would take was Stoick the Vast coming check on Hiccup, overhearing another voice in his bedroom. A distinctly feminine voice. It would be scandalous, even if their relationship was legitimate, though it was far from it.

"I need to talk to you," she wrung her hands, pacing past him. "A bunch of letters exchanged by air mail wouldn't have the same effect as face-to-face." She paused, hand on the bedpost, turning to face him eyes wide and imploring. Toothless warbled at her and she reached out to pet him absentmindedly.

Hiccup sighed, accepting they were foolish and incautious and deserved to be caught for their indiscretion. But even if that was to be the way of things, he could not send her away. Not when she looked at him like that. Not when she sought him out. Especially not when their time together was so limited. He took her hand in his and such a simple contact felt incredible after hours of longing.

"I'm listening," he told her.

Astrid opened her mouth, little hesitant squeaks spilling from her as she wrestled with her words. With an aggravated shake of her head, she said, "Look, after todayâ€”at the shopâ€”I need to know you're not angry with me."

"Angry with _you?_ Why would I be? Because your fiancÃ©e is completeâ€”?"

"I need to know if we'reâ€”okay?" she interrupted.

Hiccup snorted. The question was just so bizarre, given the circumstances.

"No. We're not okay. Nothing about thisâ€”what we're doingâ€”is okay," he replied. Astrid scoffed, rolled her eyes, and he took her other hand as well. "But that hasn't really been stopping us, has it?"

Her mouth was a thin line, slanted with her impatience. "Hiccup, you _know_ what I mean."

He chuckled, a single amused hitch in his breath, though there was no real humor in it. "Yes, Astrid. We're okay. For however long we're going to do this to ourselves, we're okay." She had not tempted Stefnir. She did not welcome his advances. Even in the height of his frustration, Hiccup could still remember the taste of her on his lips from the night before, and it held him together. "I'm beginning to think some dysfunctional part of me enjoys the pain." His tone was sarcastic. Deadpan. He met her gaze, rubbing the back of her hands with his thumbs, brushing over tiny scars from years of handling sharp weapons. He was haunted by the image of her helplessness, eyes locked on him as Stefnir had his fun. He could still see the crack it had left in her controlled visage. "Are youâ€”how are _you_ holding up?"

Astrid shoulders fell, fatigue etched in all the grooves of her face, cast into stark relief in the low candlelight. "Barely," she answered, weak and defeated. A pitiful rattle Hiccup could not bear to hear from her. He wanted to fix it. He was compelled to fix it. "You don't know what it's like, Hiccup, to have pretend like you're enjoying a kiss or a touch when your skin is actually crawling."

She withdrew her hands from him, wrapping her arms around herself to ward off the awful memory. Hiccup gripped her shoulders, small and warm and vulnerable without her cold pauldrons. There was so much

about her that was diminishing, burning out like a flame without kindle. No longer fed, no longer stoked, and he was trying to nurture the fire she had left, keeping close to its warmth while there was any left to enjoy.

"No. I don't know, but I imagine I will soon enough," he replied, and her puzzled expression drew the bitter truth from him, though it would do nothing but add more to the heavy burden they carried between them. "I'm going to Helgafell after your wedding and I'll be coming back engaged." Astrid's eyes widened predictably and he chased it with, "Political marriage, of course."

Her eyes flickered down to settle, unfocused, on the V of his tunic. "Of course," she muttered.

There was nothing he could say to fix it. No magic solution to the inevitable. He could only kiss her forehead in empty reassurance because it was not alright. It was not going to be alright. Her arms came around him slowly in a dispirited embrace. They held each other and it was like Hiccup's own impending betrothal was the final straw, tipping the scales. There had been something deceptively open-ended in their relationship before his resignation to marriage.

The silence between them was far from comfortable. In two nights they had built themselves back up just in time to crumble again. Nothing was more directly opposed to their delusional romance than reality, so loud and intrusive.

Downstairs, his father coughed and Hiccup could hear his footsteps much closer than they were, amplified by his nerves. He released Astrid immediately, stepping back, as the blood rushed in his ears.

"You should go," he said urgently. She bit her lip and advanced, eyebrows knitting in earnest. "I'm serious! If my dad finds out you're hereâ€"!"

But she wanted him, and he was powerless with her, so she grabbed his tunic and pulled him in for a kiss. His brain resisted but his body relaxed, and he listened desperately for the creak of stairs that did not come. Safe, as long as his father was oblivious. It was moronic to push their luck, and so Hiccup thought himself the most incorrigible moron of them all.

One hand slid to the nape of her neck while the other dropped to the small of her back. Every physical part of him was mutinous against reason, and it was far easier and more satisfying in the short-term to give in to the heat stirring in the pit of his stomach.

It was not that he did not want Astridâ€"nothing could be further from the truthâ€"but they were being more reckless than ever, flirting with a new level of impropriety. They needed to be away from Berk, away from his father, away from their mutual guilt that hung like a fog over the village as long as they were in it.

Then Astrid was pressing into him, no binding beneath her thin clothing. He could feel the warmth of her skin and the peaks of her breasts, and whatever traces responsibility he had shattered in an instant. He had his limits and Astrid routinely blew past all of

them.

With a hum, his lips melded against hers and Astrid released his tunic in favor of raking her fingernails through his hair, bringing goosebumps to his skin. He shuddered feeling the rising desire and that tiny voice that always tried in vain to remind him how idiotic and selfish he was being—but Astrid's mouth tasted like ale, and though Hiccup was not as fond of the amber liquid as much as most of his tribesmen, it was enticing on her lips. Delectable, and far more intoxicating than the ale itself.

"You've been drinking," he muttered, though she was lucid enough. Articulate enough. She did not reek of alcohol.

"Wouldn't you?" Astrid breathed into the infinitesimal space between their lips, defensive. "To be numb for a while and forget?"

He would, he thought bitterly. He would have drank himself to the point of blacking out to stop reliving the encounter with Stefnir in his mind—to block the image of Astrid's humiliation and misery—if he had any energy to drag himself to the Great Hall, but he had spent all of it on pounding iron and tooling leather.

But perhaps there was another reason behind Astrid's drinking with the way she plucked at his collar lacings like she was plucking at strings of his arousal? There was something unspoken but obvious—a sense of something forbidden that agitated Hiccup's hormones.

"There's—something else," she admitted in a small voice, and Hiccup latched on to the suggestive undertones. He took a steadying breath, trying to find his conscience under the shroud of yearning. How quickly his mood could turn. How easily he could be persuaded by her affections. Later, he hate himself for it.

Astrid glanced down his body, and he gazed up at the ceiling as something dangerous welled inside of him. He scrunched his eyes closed, breathing through flaring nostrils as her fingers traced over his belt buckle. The buzz of lust around them was more potent than on Dragon Island, more deliberate, and Hiccup was not surprised. Ashamed that he was actually excited, even. Everything had been speeding one way over the past couple of days. Everything had been leading them to that precipice. He could feel it coming for them like a tidal wave, but did nothing but wait for the impact.

"Hiccup—I have no right to ask you—"

But she did, and she was, and he was pathetic to consider being the illicit lover for even a fraction of a moment. So what, then, was he for pondering it a great deal longer?

"Don't," he replied, grasping her wrists to still her hands from undressing him before all protests dissolved in his mind, because he could have, without hesitation, but that was not the way it should happen. Not for her. Not a for a first time.

"It can't be him, though," Astrid whimpered and her desperation pierced him like a blade to the heart. She was not the type to show fear. To break. He could not understand that trepidation of a wedding night as she did, but he felt it in her voice, saw it in her eyes,

hurt by the way she tensed at the thought of sex. With her husband. It was backwards. She should have been revolted at the thought of sex with him, the "other man". "I justâ€¦I can'tâ€¦It shouldn't be this big of a deal, right? So why am Iâ€¦?"

But it was a big deal. To her. To himâ€¦"maybe not to Stefnir, though, who would undoubtedly see it as some great victory, arrogant braggart as he was. It sickened Hiccup to imagine it, Astrid's nerves and the way Stefnir would handle her, drunk off his matrimonial wine. They both saw it play out in their minds, Astrid and he, and they both tightened their hold on one another. The line was there, laid down in front of them, and everything was still excusable, permissible as long as it was not crossed.

Though it became ever clearer that it was a line that was meant to be crossed.

"It can't be him, Hiccup," Astrid repeated, the use of his name a plea that tugged at his heartstrings with unnecessary vigor.

She was gazing up at him intently, eyes bright with resolve. Astrid was thereâ€¦the real Astrid, shining through the defeatâ€¦and Hiccup had never been able to resist that vivacity. And suddenly, he had no inhibitions. Suddenly, giving in to whatever she wanted, being the lover Stefnir could not be, was all that mattered.

He pulled her closer. "Don't put me in the position where I'm just readying you for him." Pointless to say for what else could he expect, really? Her to be bedded on her wedding night only to come back to him afterward? No. She was using him and he was using her, as remedies for their loneliness, with all the best intentions that would ultimately count for nothing in a few days' time.

"I shouldn't ask you because it's horribly unfair, isn't it?" Astrid did not sound the least bit hesitant as she undid his belt with an ease that made his blood run hot.

She had made up her mind, and so she had made up his mind too, and Hiccup could no longer bother with what was right and fair.

"No," he answered, wits dulled by the feeling of her curves in his hands as he kneaded her gently through her tunic. "I mean, yes, it is unfairâ€¦But don't ask me because I'm not going to say no," he corrected. He smirked, holding fast to the threads of the tragically funny. "That would be the sensible thing, but we both know that's not a strength of mine."

Astrid laughed faintly, and it was a genuine and gorgeous sound. "Me neither, apparently." They shared a smile and that damning comfort was all too palpable, making a love affair far easier than it should ever be. "I'm sorry." She dropped his belt to the floor and it hit with an unapologetic clang.

Hiccup bristled, but there was no resulting inquiry from downstairs.

He did not know what possessed him, be it a raging jealousy or some innate masculine instinct to take back what was "his". With a twitching hand, he mapped her body over her clothes, and a part of him was swirling with joy, already feeling too much of her through

layers of fabric. It was a long time fantasy to have her to himself, but holding her, facing the enormity of their decision, stripped all juvenile giddiness from the moment.

"At leastâ€¦at least he won't have this," he said, and Astrid let out a shaky breath before wrapping herself around him.

Toothless snorted irritably as they bumped into the bed, connected at the mouth, nearly tripping over the dragon's head where he had been resting, bored with the poignant exchange he did not understand. They fell back, Astrid sprawled on top of Hiccup, sending their Terrible Terrors scurrying away, disgruntled. Toothless retreated to his slab.

Their kisses were open-mouthed gasps, hands exploring with tremulous delight. Hiccup's heart was racing in his chest, mirrored by Astrid's which he could feel against his arm as he reached up to undo her braid. Silky gilded strands tumbled loose and he combed his fingers through it, wafting the aroma of scented oils, overpowering him with an alluring, heady rush. He never wanted to forget the way she smelled. He wanted it seared into his brain forever, to be recalled later when he wistfully stroked the hair of someone else.

In his dreams she always wanted him just as ardently as he wanted her, but a midnight fabrication could no longer compare to the reality of her hungry touch, sliding under his clothes, leaving scorched trails of fervent need in their wake. He moaned softly, stomach clenching as her fingernails teased newly erogenous zones.

Tongues and lips and clumsy teeth came crashing together again and again, not as hurried as on Dragon Island, though they might have been better off to succumb to a similarly raw, frantic passion as they had felt then. There would be no room for distracting thoughts trying to edge their way through the desire and give them pause, but they kissed each other slow and savoring anyway, appreciating the way their lips fit together. A relaxed enough pace that Hiccup felt the occasional twinge of regret, of better judgment, beseeching him to find his common sense because they were only making matters infinitely worse for themselves.

True, they loved each other. They craved each otherâ€"and they were only going to end up hurting each other. Hiccup knew it. He was certain Astrid knew it, too, neither one of them able to wiggle out of their marriages as their responsibilities crushed all happiness in their lives. But that knowledge was not enough to make them stop, to diffuse the lust gradually consuming them with every article of clothing they shed.

It was all a blur. A flurry of gentle caresses, breathy moans, and "Is this okay?" Reassurances, encouragements, bare skin against bare skin, raising the temperature in the room like they were two beings born of fire. In the candlelight Astrid was soft, all gentle curves and edges, shadows playing across the contours of her body, begging to be chased by his tongueâ€"but what he wanted to do was restrained by inexperience. Under his fingertips, she was solid. Toned, lithe muscle, rubbing against him with a dizzying friction. It was all new, exhilarating, yet oddly familiar. Natural, as if they had always done it, like making love was a nightly thing. Oh, how he _wished _with everything he had that it could be a nightly thing.

But it never would be.

So, he knotted his hand in her hair carefully, adoring the texture of it as it slipped between his fingers. He propped himself upon his elbow, nibbling along her neck, making her gasp, and getting high of her reactions. Every whimper, every startled, pleased jerk from her was an affirmation. He wanted her to react to him, to forget about Stefnir, erasing the other man with a sweep of his tongue over her thrumming pulseline. His name was intoxicating on her lips and she hissed it into the stifling air, made thick and oppressive by the heat of their ministrations.

It should not have been so easyâ€”felt so _right._ Her naked body should have turned his face red, paralyzed him, or made him shrink back and stutter when she rolled them over. But he only gazed at her with reverence, finding her every bit as flawless as he had always believed she would be. Her pale skin was lovely against the dark fur beneath them, and she was comfortable in his bed, with him on top of her, like she belonged there. It was offensive to whatever moral constructs dictated the wrongness of their actions.

He had thought, maybe, the one hitch in their plans would be removing his prosthesis along with his pants. Astrid saw his amputation in all its scarred glory for the first timeâ€”but she did not balk. There was no disgust on her face. The last potential thing that might hinder them was inconsequential. She fondled the stump with a tenderness his could sense, but not feel, sensation nearly dead in the tissue that remained. It was an intimate touch, erotic like nothing he had previously experienced. A surge of ecstasy coursed through him as she kneaded the limb, massaging the sharp ache that had been plaguing him all day, nearly forgotten for their tryst, brought back to the forefront as she worked out the pain like she used to, when they were younger. When they were innocent.

More reassurances, declarations of attraction and need, whispered promises that it was alright that he settled between her legs, that he lower himself down on her, that he pushed forward with excruciating patience and care until she was entirely his and he was entirely hers.

Arms snaked around one another and Hiccup found his balance, albeit a bit lopsided. He moved, and they breathed together, their hearts beating in tandem. Her face in his shoulder, his face in her hair. They were one in the same and separate all at the same time, and Hiccup could not think anymore because the only thing real was Astrid wrapped around him, and _around_ him, hotter and slicker than he ever could have fantasized. Her quiet mewling into his skin, the flashes of golden light reflecting off the sweat on their bodiesâ€”perfect like it should not be. Ethereal, dreamlike enough for worries and scruples to faded into the shadows of the room. Affairs were not supposed to be so incredible. So effortless. First times were supposed to be fumbling and terrifying. Awkward and embarrassing, but none of those words fit what they had become. Perhaps their love making was how it was supposed to be, no pressure or expectations, both mutual ready for the others? Equal need. Equal longing that brought them there.

It was an eternity and brief all at once, seeming to last a blissful forever before ending abruptly in with a blinding light that rendered

Hiccup an incoherent mass of strangled cries and uncontrollable spasms. Astrid clung to him, rasping things in his ear that might have made the snap of his hips more violent had he the clarity of mind to register them—"things along the line of "yes" and "good". It was indescribable. Incomparable. Far better than any sensation he had, or might ever feel.

And he was dazed, every last bit of energy spilled into Astrid, and she was stroking him, his shoulders and his back, patterns drawn languidly over flushed and freckled skin. As the world materialized around them, and he could hear the snores of his dragon over his own ragged breathing, the obscuring cloud of desire lifted, and every fiber in him stiffened as the full realization of what they had just done hit him like a fist to the gut. In hindsight, in the aftermath, he could see the entirety of his mistake. Their mistake. Their beautiful, mind-blowing, would-do-it-over-again mistake.

Irreversible. A hasty decision from whence there was no coming back. Physical satisfaction could not suppress the guilty twist of his core. He pushed up on his hands, slowly meeting Astrid's gaze. In her eyes was something strange. Not quite contentment, not quite regret.

"Hiccup," she sighed, her palm warm and soothing against his cheek. He leaned into it. She knew and he knew how wonderful it had been.

How wrong it had been.

It was the single, most extraordinary moment in his entire life. Better than flying. But the unintended consequences began to take shape in the silence between them. In the morning, she would be back with Stefnir. In the morning, the pang in his chest would be deeper, more agonizing at the sight of them together. The jealous monster in his chest would roar louder and fight harder to see Stefnir torn from Astrid, but regardless of the unavailing victory he had just won in the confines of bed, Stefnir still had a legal claim to her. One that predated Hiccup's feelings for her. One honored by two respected families. One that neither he, nor Astrid, were in a position to dissolve. In the end, Stefnir still won, and Astrid might find comfort in the memory of their entwined bodies, but it would also be another wound to suffer when they could no longer indulge those urges.

A painful fact echoed in his mind, taunting him—"they were only going to hurt each other. They had already started. Whenever Astrid was with Stefnir and Hiccup was with his wife, they would remember each other. What they had done, and it was torment that was worse than ignorance, in retrospect. All because they were upset. All because they had the impulsiveness of children, wanting what they wanted when they wanted it, and the other person was an enabler. All because Hiccup had some deep-seated need to convince himself Astrid was his.

He withdrew from her, saying nothing and she sat up, covering her breasts with her arms as if modesty was suddenly a virtue again.

"I should—" "I should go," she murmured, sliding out of the bed to collect her clothes. Sneaky perked up at the movement, hovering over

to the bed to watching her curiously.

"Yeah, thatâ€"I think that would be best," Hiccup replied, handing her the tunic hanging off his bedpost. Their fingers brushed when she took it from him and it was completely and utterly absurd that he still felt his heart skip over a contact so harmless.

Astrid dressed quickly, and he tried to not take it as a personal insult.

"I'm sorry about this, Hiccupâ€"but I'm also _glad_ andâ€"|"

"You love me, right?" he interrupted, as if hearing her say the words would somehow justify it.

"That's why I came," she answered exasperated, bending down to capture his lips. Sweet, innocent. _Wrong_. He kissed her back anyway.

"Then it's good enough for now, I suppose." He rubbed the back of his neck, done. Spent. Wishing to fall asleep and forget the day ever happened-_most_ of the day. The parts when he had any sense.

She gave him a rueful smile, and with that, she left, creeping gracefully out of the window with Sneaky on her shoulder. Hiccup fell back against the bed, hands over his face, cursing himself. The scent of her hair lingered on his pillow, mixing with hints of sweat and sex and all of his regret.

9. Chapter 9

Astrid was wide awake, though her eyes itched with fatigue. No amount of tossing and turning, nor praying for sleep, could cure her insomnia. Her mind was reeling, keeping her up with racing thoughts and a tempest of feelings she could not block out with willpower alone.

There were no romantic ballads sung. No divine light shining down on her. She was merely a young woman, lying alone, with nothing but harsh reality to keep her company.

She flopped on to her back with an aggravated sigh, draping a hand over her forehead and staring at the indistinct shapes on her ceiling. The still and quiet of the wee morning hours provided the perfect opportunity for reflection she could really do without. Everything in her was confused, unsettled, prompting her to do irrational things, like sneak out of her house again. It was strange how everything was the same and different, all at onceâ€"how her bed was familiar, though it felt too big. Suddenly, too empty. She still felt like herself, but less ignorant. Her favorite bed clothes felt too itchy and stifling on her skin and she kicked her blanket off, reveling in the caress of brisk air on her bare thighs.

Her legs were drawn up, knees bent with her feet flat. She closed her eyes and she could still feel himâ€"Hiccup, moving over her with such measured passion, but at an inconsistent rhythm, dictated by inexperience. He had felt heavier than she imagined he would, solid and real, his lean muscle contracting beneath her fingertips with every surge of his hips, rendering her breathless. His skin was warm

and smooth except for the callouses on his industrious hands, gliding over her body with a hunger, with that same desire with which she had dug her fingernails into his shoulders. She had whispered her need into his ear as his breath rattled against her neck. It had brought goosebumps to her skin—_was_ bringing them to her skin again at the memory of it—and she sighed deeply. She tried to recall every detail—the scent of him surrounding her, the creaking of the bed frame, and that intoxicating heat between her legs. It was a maddening epicenter of pleasure, wet and exquisite, where their bodies joined. To feel that tantalizing burn and unyielding flesh boring into her, to know that it was Hiccup—|

The more she tried to commit it all to memory, the faster it faded into something surreal. Intangible. It was being replaced by a mounting frustration, something only he could satisfy. She had to have him again. She was desperate to hear another shattered moan spill from his lips—and it tore at her chest like a vicious and unrelenting animal. Her eyes burned and she pressed her palms into them, swallowing thickly.

She could have cried if she had the energy, but all she felt was defeat. She did not lament the loss of her virtue. She was, frankly, relieved to be rid of it. It no longer loomed over her like a nagging reminder of a whole world she did not yet understand.

She was so thankful she had been able to give herself to Hiccup. He was the only one worthy and that was the problem. She had not wanted Stefnir to be her first experience with sex. She knew it could not be him, but after Hiccup, she felt like it could never be him. Or anyone else. With his gentle touch, Hiccup had ruined her—spoiled her for any other man as long as she loved him. How could she accept her soon-to-be husband when every fiber of her being craved Hiccup instead? It was nauseating to think of Stefnir on top of her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth and forced down the bile. A dry sob tore loose when she thought of Hiccup making love to his future bride—some other women receiving his tender affections, lying beneath him as only Astrid should. What was meant to be a solution, sparing her from Stefnir's covetous hands for her first time, had only caused a deeper heartache. It had been a gamble. A risky move with unpredictable emotional repercussions, and she knew that. If anything, she had hoped sex with might be so strange and uncomfortable, so it would be less painful when she and Hiccup inevitably parted ways for their parallel lives. She had not anticipated how complete her relationship with him would become from one night of poor judgment, or how _right._

But she could not keep him.

She sat up, hair tousled and knotted from a restless night, lips trembling into the back of her fist and she fought back the tears. She would not cry over it. It was her own grave that she had dug, and crying was a waste of time and energy. There was no point in staying in her room, wallowing in her self-pity. She climbed out of bed, rummaging for her clothes.

If sleep was a lost cause, she might as well get started on her chores. There was a faint glow on the horizon she could see from her window, the sun close enough to rising that her early start to the day would not be considered that odd. She would go to the well first, retrieving water to wash her face and comb through her hair, all the

while using the extra time gained to steel her gut so she could face her fianc e again. She would need every extra minute of practice to play the convincing virgin, and to be able to be in the same general vicinity as Hiccup without being quite so obvious that she was his. Completely. Irrevocably.

* * *

><p>Two bales of hay sat side-by-side, each draped with a cloth sporting a crudely painted target.<p>

"Will you be on my team for the race?" Stefnir asked, nocking an arrow with ease.

He had been waiting for her in the Great Hall after breakfast like he did almost every morning. Astrid had felt the twitching her legs, urging her to run away in a panic. A deep breath kept her moving forward and supported the insincere smile on her face. She had let him slip and arm around her waist, proud her skin crawled only a little. Guilt had become more repulsive than the touch itself. A simple hand on her body was not as jarring as it used to be. It was a different kind of fear that gripped her as her betrothed pulled her into his side.

She was afraid of being found out  of the abrupt end to her affair with the chief's son. Of the shame it would bring. She was not afraid of Stefnir. Not his possessive stares, nor his assertive hands. His touch, though unwelcome, could never be as intimidating as it had been only the day before. There was nothing left he could take from her  nothing more intimate and personal than what she had given Hiccup. On her terms, or her own free will. It was empowering to know it had been her choice and that Stefnir could never have that claim. No matter what came next for them, she could adapt and endure, for he would not have that most vulnerable piece of her.

"Well?" he prodded and Astrid chewed at the inside of her lip.

It had been easy to be around him as long as they were not talking. She could almost forget he was there, squinting as she focused in on her target, already decorated with arrows  but Stefnir was eager for conversation. He did not know that only hours before, she had been moaning Hiccup's name, clinging to him desperately. She wished Stefnir would, for once, find something more fascinating than her, but he was clueless. He had no idea that every syllable she uttered dripped with a confession he could not hear, or that her rigidity was due to the secret she contained. One damning truth she wished she could scream at the top of her lungs and be done with it.

"I won't be racing." She sighed heavily, drawing back her bowstring. "Unfortunately, mom has forbidden me from any competition until after the wedding." She took a steadying breath and loosed her arrow. It hit the bullseye's edge. "I think she's afraid the scrapes and bruises would clash with the dress."

"Really? I think it would be all the more genuine." He raised his bow, taking aim at his target. "All the more you."

Astrid could not help the smirk on her face. It felt good to be bonding over archery practice, sharing a fondness for weaponry. She remembered clinging to such moments in the beginning of their

relationship, believing for nearly two years that it would be enough to bridge the loveless gap between them. With Stefnir, she could connect with the fifteen years of her life she had dedicated to the war with dragons. Those pursuits did not seem like such a waste with someone who truly appreciated them. Someone who had walked that same path before herâ€”but appealing to who she had once been was not enough to satisfy who she had become.

"If you need another teammate, there's always Gustav Larson," she suggested, picking another arrow from the pile. "He'd bend over backwards to be in an official race."

Stefnir scoffed, firing his next shot. It stuck the white ring around the bullseye. They were not keeping score, but Astrid felt a small degree of smugness. She was technically winning.

"Gustav is no match for Hiccup and Toothless. I need a better flyer, or for Hiccup to use another dragon. With just one Night Fury in play, the odds are hardly fair. It's practically cheating."

Astrid's breath hitched but it went unnoticed. Hiccup's name on Stefnir's lips was like an accusation, and she bristled. The appropriate response was to agree with him, but she was not on speaking terms with her sense of propriety.

"Hold on, now," she said, nocking her arrow. She straightened up and pulled back the bowstring, brow furrowed. "Hiccup could win a dragon race on a Gronckle. He's the best flyer on Berk. There's something intuitive there, when he flies. The type of dragon he's on hasn't been the determining factor in any of his victories." He released the arrow. It hit dead center.

"I doubt that." Stefnir lowered his bow, one end in the grass, resting his folded hands atop the other. "It sounds like you want him to win," he said with a subtle indignation.

"No, I'mâ€”I'm just being realistic." She plucked at her bowstring idly, avoiding his gaze.

"So, you'll be rooting for the right team?" Stefnir asked, quirking his brow.

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "Don't I always?"

Stefnir's grunt was skeptical, his lips pursed as he gathered the remaining arrows. His eyes were piercing and Astrid continued to stare determinedly at the bow in her hands like it was the most fascinating thing. If looks had any physicality behind them, Stefnir could strip her bare for a shred of honesty.

"At least you'll be there in support of Reyr?"

She glanced at him then, resolute. Whatever complicated relationship the two of them were in, his youngest sibling was an innocent. She would not make the boy collateral damage. "Of course, I will. I wouldn't miss the Selection forâ€”!"

Stefnir cut her off with a forceful kiss. Firm and cold. When he pulled back, he was searching. Scrutinizing. "I love you, Astrid."

Her simpering smile felt too wooden on her face, but she was finding it harder to care. A dangerous disregard for how convincing she actually was.

"I know you do," she replied, raising up on her toes to kiss his cheek, his beard tickling her chin. It was not a particularly enthusiastic peck, but it was taking initiativeâ€"another small measure to take some power back. She could stand it, because it was her decision to kiss him, and it was only another small piece of her daily charade that would carry her into the evening hours she yearned for.

Stefnir was bewildered for a moment, then his jaw clenched. "Are you feeling alright?" he asked. His eyes narrowed, and he pulled back from her with that same, penetrative stare.

"Yes, I'm fine. Why?"

He turned away and his tone was biting. "No reason."

And all Astrid could think about were flashes of green above her, bathed in candlelight.

* * *

><p>"Okay. Suppose we waxed up our dragons' scalesâ€"?"<p>

Hiccup glanced up at Tuffnut flatly. He had been massaging his cramping, overworked hands. The soot of the forge lingered stubbornly beneath his short fingernails. "Well, they'd be more water resistant. Not the same thing as aerodynamic. So, unless we're racing underwater and nobody told meâ€"|"

Tuffnut groaned, slumping his shoulders, hands thrown up in defeat. "Well, I don't hear any of you coming up with any winning strategies!"

Snotlout snorted. He set his tankard down and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand before answering, "Here's a winning strategy: Fly our dragons, catch some sheep, and drop them into our baskets."

Hiccup smirked. "Simple and effective. However did you come up with that idea?"

"I have my moments," Snotlout replied, exaggeratedly proud.

"Alright, assholes. How about a team name, then?" Ruffnut huffed, folding her arms. "What say you, team captain?"

Hiccup shrugged. His eyes settled on Fishlegs. The other boy seemed oblivious to the conversation, scribbling away in the Book of Dragons, tongue poking thoughtfully between his lips.

"I say we go with Specter Fuckers!" Tuffnut offered, waving his hands dramatically, as if there was a banner hung in front of his face, displaying his suggestion. "I heard the other team is going by the Specters. Our team name impliesâ€" "

"I know what it implies, Tuff, thanks," Hiccup interrupted. "No vulgarity, please."

"Ugh, fine," Tuffnut conceded. "The Specter Defilers?"

"Oh! Specter Ravagers?" Ruffnut chimed in.

Hiccup rolled his eyes and resumed working the aches from his palms.

"Both of those suck Gronckle ass!" Snotlout waved his hand dismissively. He propped his feet up, unconcerned with dried bits of mud that fell from his boots onto the table. Automatically, without tearing his eyes away from the Book of Dragons, Fishlegs dragged his plate away from Snotlout's filthy footwear. "How about the _Snot_wings?"

The twins blew loud, identical raspberries.

"Oh, come on! It's way better than anything you two muttonheads could come up with!"

Hiccup lost interest in his friends' argument over which cringe-worthy team name was more suitable. Fishlegs's charcoal pencil continued to scratch across the pages of the Book of Dragons, drawing his attention. The blonde's round face was scrunched up with excitement, his eyes alight in a way Hiccup envied. Hiccup's life had become a seemingly endless barrage of longing, heartache, and regret, spiced with just enough bitterness to be really overwhelming. His hours were occupied with children's saddles and torturous thoughts of Astrid. He missed fifteen, when dragons were all that mattered and love was easier.

"What are you working on, Fishlegs?" Hiccup asked, making the other young man jump. It was as if Fishlegs forgot there was anything else but him and dragons, and Hiccup could relate.

"Oh! Hiccup. You startled me!" Fishlegs laid the book on the table and slid it across the table. "I've been filling in missing data for various dragon species native to the archipelago."

Hiccup's brow furrowed as he examined the open page. It was an old drawing, very stylized—“one of the earliest entries.

"Tide Gliders?" He considered Fishlegs, trying to keep his skepticism to a minimum. "Fishlegs, what dragons have you encountered lately that we haven't already thoroughly studied?"

He tapped the book pointedly. "Tide Gliders haven't been seen around Berk for over a decade. They were all but hunted to extinction for their curative saliva."

"I haven't seen a Tide Glider, of course," Fishlegs replied, drumming his fingers against the table top, "but I've read about them."

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow. "Apart from the Book of Dragons?"

"Yeah!" Fishlegs cleared his throat and adopted an official tone.

"The archives are full of firsthand accountsâ€”documents of sale and damage claims. 'So-and-so, son of Some Guy, to be monetarily compensated in a value equal to that of his fishing vessel, sunk by one fearsome Tide Glider, which fired, upon their encounter, a single mass of acidicâ€”'"

"I, uhâ€”I get the point," Hiccup said, holding up a hand.

Fishlegs grinned sheepishly. "I'm paraphrasing, of course, but there is all kinds of dragon knowledge scattered in between boring legal stuff. I'm surprised you didn't know, if I'm being honest." He took back the book.

"Ball Busters!" the twins and Snotlout suddenly cried in unison. They grinned at Hiccup, hopeful.

"No," he deadpanned and their faces fell. With scathing looks, they leaned forward and brainstormed more team names. Hiccup turned back to Fishlegs. "I've never found the archives particularly thrilling reading."

Fishlegs buried his nose back into the Book of Dragons. "It would be worth it for all of the bizarre laws. Things about how to properly conduct revenge killingsâ€”how many enemy lives compensate for loss of limb, a law about a _holmgang_, andâ€”"

Hiccup's lip curled. "A what?"

Fishlegs straightened up and answered, brightly, "_Holmgang!_ You know, suitors challenging each other for the right to marry a ladyâ€”or something along those linesâ€”but that's not nearly as interesting as this dispute between two farmers over the right to breed this one particular yakâ€”"

It was as if Hiccup's heart malfunctioned, pounding furiously, though it felt like all the blood was draining from him. Everything in him seized with shock, like he had been dropped in the northern sea in the middle of a Berkian winter.

He shook his head, holding up both his hands. His mouth went dry. "Wait. Wait, wait, _wait._ Back up. There's a law about fighting for a woman?"

He hardly dared to believe it. There had to have been some mistake. Of all the likely scenarios, Fishlegs misreading a law was at the top of a list. Hiccup did not want to get his hopes up, and yetâ€”|

"Yeah," Fishlegs answered. "We're Vikings, Hiccup. There's probably a law about fighting overâ€”|everything."

His tongue darted out, wetting the corner of rough lips, stuck together. "Whatâ€”|What does this law say, exactly?"

Fishlegs shrugged. He screwed up his face, trying to recall words scribbled on aging parchment. There was an overall disinterest in his voice. "Uh, well, from what I remember, it's just one guy challenging another for the right to marry a lady. Whoever draws first blood wins or some such ruleâ€”it's in the archive, y'know, if you're interested. Although, I'm not sure _why_ you would be

interested."

Eyes narrowed inquisitively in Hiccup's direction, and he laughed nervously, hearing the question forming in the other young man's head. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants. He did not know if he was more worked up by his friend's curiosity, or the ill-advised hope collecting in a long abandoned corner of his heart. "I-I'm going to be the future chief. I should probably, erâ€¦familiarize myself with our laws. Especially the more obscure ones in case an issue ever arises."

"An issueâ€¦?" Fishlegs's brow knitted. His gaze skipped all over Hiccup's face, connecting dots that Hiccup could not see. It was unnerving, as much as the night Hiccup had thought his father had found out about Toothless, back when befriending dragons was a secret worth keeping.

Hiccup stood up from the table, tugging on the hem of his tunic to smooth out his clothes. He felt uncomfortably transparent. "I'm going toâ€¦look into this _holmgang_ thing. Whereabouts in the archive did you say it was?"

"I, uhâ€¦didn't, but you can find it on the center table, beneath a stack of trade agreementsâ€¦"at least, that's where I think I left it, butâ€¦"

Hiccup did not hesitate. He turned for the archivesâ€¦a tiny, forgotten chamber tucked behind stacked casks of ale in a corner of the Great Hall seldom visited.

>As he strode away from the table, he heard the twins and his cousin shout, "The Neck Breakers!"<p>

After a moment without reply, Tuffnut called, "I'll take your silence as a yes!"

* * *

><p>Astrid sighed bracingly, folding her arms as she approached the table of once familiar faces she hardly knew anymore. She should have sat with them every day for the past two years. The seat beside Ruffnut used to be hers, but it had come to be like crossing into hostile territory.<p>

"Snotlout, if Hookfang lights himself on fire and you fly close to Svensonâ€¦" Tuffnut held his two hands parallel, demonstrating his tactic.

Ruffnut cleared her throat loudly, elbowing her brother and nodding at Astrid. The male Thorston clammed up immediately, and even Snotlout's posture was defensive. Fishlegs cast her a fleeting glance, then retreated deeper into the Book of Dragons with his shoulders hunched.

"Whoops. The enemy approaches," Tuffnut droned, and his scowl stung like crack of a whip.

Astrid swelled indignantly, hoping the puffing of her chest would repel their cool stares. It was only partially effective, and only if she did not fixate on the thick cloud of resentment hanging over them.

"I'm not your enemy," she replied, hands on her hips.

"You fly with Stefnir," Snotlout grumbled.

"Yes, but not during the—"oh, what does it matter?" she scoffed. No excuse would ever satisfy them. "I'm looking for Hiccup. Have you seen him?"

They were all taken aback.

Ruffnut perked up. "What do_ you_ want with Hiccup?" She stroked her braids, eyes locked intently on Astrid.

The young men were far too interested in her answer as well, leaning forward expectantly. It was as everywhere she walked and everyone she spoke to was trying to trap her, and Astrid just wanted to be the one place—"with one person"—with whom she could speak freely. She looked away, jaw clenched. There was something insulting about being under their scrutiny.

"Wedding—things." She shifted from one foot to the other, avoiding Ruffnut's prying gaze. "I have to talk to him about the ceremonial sword. He's forging it," she lied.

Snotlout and Tuffnut let out loud, hollow laughs.

"_Wow!_" Tuffnut remarked.

Snotlout scratched at his chin. "You really know how to twist the knife, don't you Astrid?"

Her face burned, and she balled her hands into fists. If he only knew. If that arrogant bag of wind only _knew—

"Shut up. In order for that to be true, Hiccup would have to have feelings for me and he's made it abundantly clear that he doesn't."

"Right—and Barf and Belch only has one head," Tuffnut snickered.

Snotlout smirked. "And dragons breathe ice!"

Fishlegs spoke up, "A-Actually, there are some species that do exclusively—" The withering look Snotlout gave him only made him more bold. "Well, some of them do, thank you very much."

Astrid glanced beseechingly at Fishlegs, the most sane and rational person at the table. She wanted to tell all of them the truth, desperately. She hated the dishonesty. The duplicity. It was not her—but neither was the love affair she could not seem to break off. It would have been a great relief to admit everything, but as loyal as her friends might have been once, she was not sure they were any longer. She was not about to test them with a truth so heavy. The friends she once had were all but memories, caged up by two years of lies.

"Hiccup's in the archives, reading up on old laws or something," Fishlegs answered.

Astrid's brow furrowed. She opened her mouth to ask why, but snapped it shut when she realized it did not matter. Where Hiccup was, there she would be also.

"Thanks, Fishlegs," she said, and there was something about his intrigued gaze that made her stomach flip unpleasantly.

She hurried toward the archives, keeping her head down and greeting no one as she wove between long tables. Once she was behind the casks of ale, she was invisible. To the vast majority of Berk, the room might as well have been a figment of imagination for how often it was noticed and how often it was used.

She knocked once, but threw open the door immediately, greeted by her startled lover, spinning around with a worn old piece of parchment clutched firmly in his hands.

"Astrid!" he exclaimed.

Every muscle relaxed at the sight of him. She smiled, and it was involuntary.

"Hiccup," she murmured, shutting the door behind her. The chatter from the Great Hall was muffled to a faint and distant hum.

She glanced around the room, wrinkling her nose at the cobwebs and fine layer of dust settled over everything. There was one large table in the center of the claustrophobic little room, littered with parchments and a few large, leather-bound tomes. Only a couple of narrow shelves stood against the far wall, lined with scrolls and fragments of stone with faded writing—the oldest standing claims to land and titles, likely validating the legitimacy of the Haddock bloodline, if one took the time to trace it back. All things considered, it was a sparse collection of documents, but their people were not known to be scholarly, or all together that literate. It would never compare to the majesty of great, foreign libraries Trader Johann spoke of, but it was decent enough for Berk and its priorities.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" Hiccup regained a bit of the composure she had startled from him. He repeated, with more conviction, "What are you doing here?"

"I needed to see you," she answered.

She took a step toward him but he did not meet her eye. He seemed subdued, his body language all wrong. He leaned back against the table, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, holding the strange document loosely in the other.

"What's the matter?" she demanded, bending slightly to catch his gaze. As she straightened up, she dragged his eyes with her.

"Last time you needed to see me things kind of went—" he gestured between them vaguely.

"Good," Astrid said firmly, and it only confused him.

"Good?" he repeated, far more surprised than he should have been. He

started fidgeting with the parchment in his hand, nervous in a way he had not been since they were fifteen and innocent. "Iâ€|Really? I mean, we justâ€|_really?_"

"Hiccupâ€|you were there. How could you think it was anything butâ€|?" She stopped abruptly, a thought entering her head. An insecurity she had tried so hard to keep buried. She swallowed hard, gut clenching as she remembered the awkward, bashful aftermath. The way he had been withdrawn. "Me, right? I wasn'tâ€|"

"_No!_" he blurted out, and she recoiled. "No, you were great, Astrid." His ears went red and he coughed into his fist. "It was incredible for me, but I thoughtâ€|maybeâ€|with how quickly you leftâ€|"

Astrid might have laughed if he was not so disconcerted. "That I didn't enjoy it?"

"Or you finally realized how stupid this all isâ€|I keep waiting for one of us to wise up. I figured it would likely be you, and that last night wasâ€|"

Astrid felt a pang in her chest. Her fears were the same. They were always waiting for the next breakâ€|something to shatter the daydream they were living in. Being carefree and happyâ€|truly contentâ€|had become a very foreign concept. They were doomed to an inescapable misery, so perhaps it was better to imagine ending things on their terms, while they still had some semblance of control?

But neither one of them was strong enough.

She closed the space between them, pleased he did not balk.

"Hiccupâ€|" She took his chin between her thumb and index finger, guiding him forward for a tender kiss. His lips were ambrosia, and she leaned into him. Her entire body tingledâ€|tendrils of delight when his free hand came to her waist. He was kissing her back, sweet and polite, typical of his affections until she stirred up his passions. Always the instigator.

They pulled back, mouths parting with a soft noise, their lips moistened with a mutual relish. Astrid slid a hand into his hair, stroking through strands of auburn. His thumb was idly massaging her side through her fitted tunic, and he was entirely focused on her in that way that made her feel feminine and desirable, yet every bit her bold, uncompromising self, in a way Stefnir never could.

"So, I-I wasâ€|I was good?" he whispered, almost inaudible. When Astrid clicked her tongue, he clarified, "I mean, for you. I was good for you?"

Astrid distinctly remembered arching up into him when his skilled hands kneaded her breasts, and his uneven teeth grazed the delicate column of her neck.

"Yes, you idiot," she muttered, swatting his arm.

He smiled, but it was neither smug, nor lecherous. It was born of relief.

>"That'sâ€|" he closed his eyes, bringing his forehead to hers with chuckle that fluttered her bangs.<p>

Astrid ran a hand down his arm, appreciating even the light pressure of such loving contact. She tried to curl her hand around his, but her fingers brushed against the parchment she forgot was there. It had to be something significant with how determinedly he held on to it.

"What is that?" she asked, inclining her heads toward the document.

Hiccup's eyebrows rose, glancing down as if just remembered it was in his hand. There was an air of excitement about him as he held it out in front of him. "A solution to our problem. I think," he answered enigmatically.

"What?" Astrid stared at the dubious parchment. "What are you talking about?"

He was very earnest as he replied, "I think this is a way I can get you out of marrying Stefnir Svenson." The resolve in his eyes caught her off guard. For a moment, she dared to believe it might be true.

She took the document from him, scanning it quickly, her mind latching on to words like "challenge" and "suitor" and "blood" with rapidly mounting nausea. She could see it play out in her headâ€"the violence, the clashing of blades, and Stefnir's ruthlessness. The air was stolen from her lungs in an instant.

"Hiccup, no," she rasped.

He took the parchment from her, waving it emphatically. "This is the answer."

"_No,_" Astrid insisted. She could see him, writing on the ground with Stefnir brandishing a blood-stained blade.

Hiccup scowled, as he so readily did when his ideas were challenged. "You want to marry the guy?"

"Of course I don't want to marry him! But what this is talking aboutâ€"this _holmgang _thingâ€"first _blood?_" Her incomplete thought hovered in the air like a plea.

Hiccup rolled up the document, tossing back to the table with blatant frustration. "You don't think I can do it," he accused.

"I don't want you to get hurt," she corrected. She had no doubt he would do it, but his success was the questionable thing. Her fiancÃ©'s brutality in battle was not. "This is combat, Hiccup. Not something you can talk your way out of, or invent some crazyâ€"Oh, my gods." She turned to him, wide-eyed. Hiccup was leaning back against the table again, brow furrowed over pensive eyes. "You _have, _haven't you? In your head, there's already some ridiculousâ€"!"

He was so despondent. His tone, so weary, when he told her, "I can'tâ€"sit by and watch him put his hands on you anymore."

Astrid's lip trembled, barely containing further protest. She was powerless to dissolve her own engagement and there was Hiccup, providing a way out with a selflessness that stung. She never wantedâ€”never intendedâ€”his self-sacrificial tendencies to solve her problems. To come to the rescue in her battleâ€”then she saw it again, in her mindâ€”Hiccup with his future betrothed, gazing wistfully at Astrid and Stefnir from across the Great Hall, full of all their unrealized potential and all of their regret.

No, it was not her fight. It was theirs. It had always been theirs from the beginning. They had been in it together before they even knew true scope of everything.

"And if you win, what then?" she sighed. "What about your engagement?"

"It would be off, of course," Hiccup responded flippantly, with a characteristic disregard for the gravity of his own situation.

"And your dad is just going to be okay with it?" Astrid retorted skeptically.

Hiccup snorted. "Cancelling an arrangement that doesn't even exist yet? I think he'll get over it."

His mind was made up, and Astrid could sense the futility of her concerns. She was being swept up again, but it was not in the tide of Stefnir's pride and arrogance, for once. She was being carried along in Hiccup's recklessness. She could not overcome the undertow of his righteousness, and she would not have wanted to do any such thing if it had been anyone else. But Hiccup had her heart. He safeguarded her sanity, and he was prepared to gamble it all on the chance he might be able to win the rights to her, legally. Indisputably. Overlooking the catastrophic effects if he lost.

"Hiccupâ€”I can't ask you to do this for me," she insisted. Risks were not her forte. The status quo was horrible, but Hiccup was alive and well in it. She was not keen to see that change, for Stefnir was not one to show restraint in battle.

"Then I suppose it's a good thing you're not asking meâ€”that this is something I decided to do on my own." And he was much too casual about it.

"First blood, Hiccupâ€”and if you think, for one moment, someone like Stefnir would stop thereâ€”!"

"I know. He's going to try to beat all future fight out of me, for good," Hiccup said, pulling her closer, wrapping her in an embrace that was meant to be reassuring. It was not. "So, I'll just outsmart him."

Astrid grimaced, balling her hands into fists on his chest. "Don't do thatâ€”downplay this and make it sound so damn easy."

"Nothing in my life worth fighting for has ever been easyâ€”Toothless, youâ€”"

She rolled her eyes, and snapped back with sarcasm he could be proud of. "Oh. Thank you, for comparing me to your dragon."

"The highest praise I can give," he replied, smiling that plucky grin, rife with delusional optimismâ€"but she was not in the mood for it.

"You're such aâ€" "

Hiccup silenced her with a perfectly timed and heartfelt, "I can't let him have youâ€"I just can'tâ€" "

His sincerity was unfairly enticing.

And their lips were crashing together. And Astrid was furious with herself, susceptible to Hiccup's vulnerabilities, wanting to save him the disappointment and heartache of refusing him in her frustration with him. Perhaps it was self-serving, because she also benefited from his desire, just like she would be the one to benefit from his clash with Stefnir. She felt selfish, though she did not want any of it, but she was also selfish for not wanting any of itâ€"for not wanting to chase the slightest possibility of being free of Stefnir. She wanted Hiccup to herself, and she wanted him unscathed, and unless perpetual unhappiness was the answer, she could not have it both ways.

They turned around, so she was the one backed up the table. She gasped, soft and wanton, as Hiccup's lips found her neck. Her hands grasped his belt, always escalating things when he was so tender. She was shameless as she seized him by the tunic, dragging him down with her as she fell back against the table. He went willingly, deftly undoing his belt the rest of the way, and Astrid figured she needed to enjoy him while he was still breathing.

10. Chapter 10

****A/N****: I want to thank everyone for the reviews! I'm bad at responding individually because Tumblr is my main site for writing now, but I see all of your positive reviews in my email. I'm so deeply appreciative! Thank you so much and...don't stop reviewing. You may not get a PM from me, but that doesn't mean I didn't see it all. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

* * *

><p>"Ye're up early." Gobber narrowed his eyes as he hobbled into the smithy. "It's not like ye te be workin' before the Terrors sing." He leaned against a workbench. "Are ye sick?"<p>

Hiccup shook his head, grogginess holding on tightly. His brain was fuzzy and body, sluggish. His eyes itched with protest, urging him to go back to bed. The breaking dawn and the cool, misty morning was meant to be enjoyed indoors, fast asleep under a layer of warm furs, with Sharpshot curled up against him. Not even Toothless roused him so early, but Hiccup had a purpose in that shop; a motivation that kept him from dropping his head onto his workbench and dozing off again.

"No. I just have a personal p-project," he yawned, "with all the saddle orders to finish up this week, I figured I needed to do this on my own time."

He rubbed his bleary eyes, brows knitted together as he tried to make sense of the plans he had sketched the night before when he had been more lucid. He had hurried home from the Great Hall with a burning idea. A way to win. A way to have the upper hand in his eventual fight with Stefnir Svenson. A way to, well, not die. Or, so he hoped.

Charcoal had moved across blank parchment with conviction, cheered on the by flickering candle. Toothless had been by Hiccup's side, head on his lap as he sketched out his victory. Hiccup had been in his element, so clever, so confident soâ€¦

Idiotic, maybe.

In the dim morning light, he scanned over the plans with new doubt.

"Dragon Blade?" Gobber mused, peering over Hiccup's shoulder, suddenly much too close.

Hiccup jumped, resisting the inherent urge to throw his arms over his work. It was not like the older man had not already seen it, and it was not like his mentor was not already used to his more bizarre schemes. Hiccup was no stranger to skepticism, with his penchant for creating remarkable inventions out of the most impractical of ideas.

Gobber scoffed. "What could yeh possibly need a sword for? Besides, we've got a whole shop full, if yeh felt the need te endanger life and remainin' limb." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the weapon's display, an assortment of untouched swords and axes, in less demand than dragon-related wares.

"I need this sword, Gobber. I can'tâ€¦I can't exactly explain why, right now," Hiccup drummed his fingers against his work station, "but it's important."

The older Viking waved dismissively, in a manner that Hiccup knew all too well, that he had seen far too often in his younger years. It stirred up residual resentment and Hiccup frowned, shoulders falling as he huffed.

"I can't see the use in a flamin' sword when yeh've got a dragon, but as long as yeh get the rest of yer work done, I can't complain what daft project yeh do in yer free time. Less than a week 'til the Selection." Gobber brandished a thick finger accusingly. "Don't let me catch yeh slackin'!"

"Not slacking," Hiccup muttered. "More like sitting here, hopelessly lost." He glanced over his plans one more time, scratching his head. "Now, how am I going to apply the Monstrous Nightmare saliva?" He stood up and made his way for the iron ore.

* * *

><p>Astrid leaned in, resting her head on Hiccup's shoulder. They were in the cove under the cover of night and their dragons were sentinels, guarding their privacy. It was better than crawling through his window, trying not to step too heavily or moan too

loudly. Every creaking floorboard made Astrid tense, like it might give them away. That night, outdoors, only the moon spied on them, luminous in the sky and sparkling over the pond water, neutral and silent.<p>

They had been lucky over the past week, not yet caught, not arousing too much suspicion. Stefnir still strutted about with his arm around Astrid like he had won some great prizeâ€”like she was his trophy to wave over everyone else. She affirmed his superiority. He held her tighter if Hiccup was anywhere around. She hated it, his undesirable traits growing more and more prominent as her relationship with Hiccup became more comfortable. She had been oblivious before she had someone to compare her fiancÃ©e too, and it was a stark contrast between Hiccup and Stefnir.

She fooled herself into believing that the outcome of the holmgang had already been decided and that she was free of her arranged marriage, because it was easier. She did not want to dwell on what was a more likely reality to comeâ€”Stefnir defeating Hiccup, winning her officially and holding it against her the rest of their miserable, married lives. Pretending Hiccup's victory was a sure thing was how she could sleep at night. She convinced herself they were collecting their winnings early. That made everything between them permissible, and she could forget.

Sitting with her lover on the cool grass, tracing his inseam with her fingertips, felt right. It was what should have been, and what she hoped might finally be. Legitimate. Accepted, without the stain of infidelity tarnishing what was otherwise so beautiful and effortless. She could laugh with Hiccup, saying whatever stupid thing came to her mind that she might bite back in her fiancÃ©e's presence for fear of his judgment. No quip or stumbled punchline fell too flat with him. She could not remember the last time she had joked around with Stefnir, so carefree.

She sat up, running her hand through auburn hair, soft and sleek, and missing a crucial piece of ornamentation.

"Handsome," she crooned and Hiccup smiled sardonically as she twisted two braids in place. Once a sad excuse to touch him, the small plaits had become enduring symbol of her affection. In public, they were a sort of claim to him, their true significance unknownst to anyone else. She never let him go too long without one, and though he rolled his eyes, he let her play with his hair anyway, patient and still.

"Thank you, Astrid," he said, gently tugging at the braids. "What would I do without you?"

She nudged him. "Not look half as stylish, for one thing."

"Oh, well, that's what matters."

He kissed her forehead and those dormant butterflies in her stomach exploded to life. She felt feminine, girlish, and it was alright as long as she still possessed the ability to grasp him by the tunic or the back of the head, pulling him in for a decisive lip lock in which she had the control. Theirs was a relationship of give and take. A mutually beneficial dance between lovers. Hiccup surrendered to her as often as he advanced.

Things had been frantic those first few nights; a bit of talk preceding the passionate entwining of their bodies, hot and breathless in the dark. Time had been running out then, the inevitable wedding approaching that would drive a wedge between them they could not circumvent, save for the occasional desperate tryst when the nights grew too lonely and loving another's body grew too intolerable. That had driven Astrid into Hiccup's arms, his bed, with the fear their illicit affair would soon be expired. But, they had a solution, however improbable.

Hiccup's hand was on her waist, innocent and unmoving. Astrid crushed their lips together with less frequency, savoring the slow and languid kissing. She did not know exactly how long they had been in the cove, just talking. Being together. Filling in the missing pieces of themselves before things escalated any further that night, as they were bound to do.

Their dragons frolicked and it all seemed too comfortable. Too relaxed. A romantic make-believe born of false sense of security. Astrid picked at her fingernails absentmindedly. There as a nagging fear in the corner of her mind too loud to ignore, even as she tried to muffle it with false, newfound hope.

"Hiccup—the Selection is tomorrow, and the wedding is a few days after that." She took his hand in hers, massaging over his knuckles, appreciating all the subtle details of his skin—contours and textures that made him tangible beyond the passing fantasies of adolescent desire. Details to hold onto. "You still haven't challenged Stefnir to the _holmgang_."

He sighed heavily and nodded, fingers curling around her hand with an acknowledging squeeze. "I intend to after the Selection. The kids and their families deserve the village's full attention tomorrow. I don't want to take away from that. It's about them, not about us, or him."

"Hiccup—" she frowned, staring at the grass. "What are you doing about it, though? It's not enough to challenge Stef and hope for the best."

Hiccup leaned back on one hand, voice upbeat. "I have something I'm working on. I've been up early every morning. It's going to give me the advantage." His eyes had that gleam—the one that always heralded a stroke of brilliance, bordering on insanity.

Astrid's interest was piqued. "What is it?" she asked, glancing up through long lashes, pinning him in her sight with a probing curiosity.

Hiccup pursed his lips, tilting his head one way and the other, hands gesturing noncommittedly. "I think it's better if you don't know. Think of it as, um—plausible deniability!"

Astrid wrinkled her nose, yanking her hand from his. "Hiccup—"

He reached for her again, but she folded her arms, clenching her jaw as she glared her disappointment. Her shoulders hunched and his smile did little to reassure her.

"Don't worry, Astrid. I think I've got a real shot." He capture her braid in his palm, smoothing over it with his fingers. It was innocuous affection, but she still shuddered. She could not look at him though, and betray her doubt, but he dropped his hand anyway. It fell to his lap, defeated. "You don't think so."

His brow furrowed and Astrid's arched in apology, but he just stared blankly out at the rippling water disturbed by whatever lurked beneath it. His mind was racing, and Astrid could not see beyond the minute darts of his eyes as he mulled over thoughts she wish she knew. Pensive and tight-lipped, coaxing Hiccup to be forthcoming was like prying open a steel dragon trap with her hands.

"It's not that I think you can't do it," she clarified, fiddling with his bangs until he jerked away. She dragged her hand over her face, breathing deeply. "Your methods are unconventional. But this is combat, Hiccup, clashing swords that you can't just think your way out of." She gripped his knee like a vice, leaning in until their eyes met. "You're actually going to have to cross blades with him, and Stef he's brutal."

"I intend to challenge him to a fight. I'm not going to talk him into surrender, or use Toothless, or anything beyond what is acceptable by the terms of the _holmgang_. If I'm going to save you from him, then it has to be fair. It can't be anything that breaks the rules or can later be contested, or we'll end up right where we started. One weapon. One shield. That is what's allowed, and that's what I'm going to use." He paused for a beat, then his hand covered hers, warm and comforting. "With, y'know my particular flair."

"Okay, but what does that even mean?"

He shrugged and she growled, but the way he brushed his fingertips along her arm, sweet and not overly suggestive, tempted her forgiveness. In her foresight, she had brought a blanket to their prearranged meeting, and she felt they should put it to use. More pretending. More assumptions things would end in their favor. But even delusions could be pleasant for a time.

* * *

><p>Vibrant banners adorned with images of dragons, no longer slain, but ridden by Vikings, waved in the steady breeze. There was not an inch of the village untouched by the enticing aroma of food, wafting from simmering cauldrons and food stands, fragrant with fresh produce and delectable concoctions, undercut by the bitter, heady scent of copious ale. It was a typical festival on Berk. The air hummed with excited chatter and dragons' roars. Children hurried about, practically underfoot, paying no heed to the neatness of their attire as they wrestled and played.<p>

The Selection was a formal occasion, like Snoggletog or Winter Nights, new by comparison, but still an important aspect of Hooligan life. Traditions had to start somewhere, and dragons had become an integral part of their tribe. It had been Stoick's decision to create a significant celebration with dragons as its focus. Any excuse to throw a festival, get drunk, and be merry, went over well the rest of the village, boosting morale. There had been no contest.

For two years, the Selection had been a highly anticipated event a

rite of passage for children turning ten. That had been the arbitrary age agreed upon by Hiccup, his father, and the council for owning a dragon. It was not practical for younger children to select and ride dragons on a whim—something that required skill and some measure of maturity. Only two years in practice, the Selection had been easily and widely accepted as a defining moment in any young Hooligan's life. To be old enough to own and care for a dragon was monumental, marking a transition into a more responsible age. It also served the dual purpose of keeping an accurate census—which families own which dragons. It was an event treated with as much reverence as their village could muster.

Hiccup wrapped a fox-fur cloak around his shoulders, pinning it in place with a silver broach. He had designed the decoration himself, sporting the Strike Class emblem he had adopted as his own personal sigil. His dark charcoal-colored tunic was trimmed with silver silk samite, embroidered with knotwork at the neck, sleeves, and hem. His belt was thick and snug around his waist, tooled with stylized dragons woven into more intricate patterns on leather that fed into an ornate buckle—all a pretentious display of his wealth and status that was somehow excusable under the guise of formality. On his wrists were identical bracers of woven and studded leather. He looked every bit the son of a Viking chief, and he sighed, picking up Sharpshot and setting the dragon on his shoulder, resigned to playing his part of chief-in-training for the day.

The Terrible Terror scurried about on his upper back, wrapping his tail partially around him for added balance. How fortunate Sharpshot was, unconcerned with meticulous bathing and grooming at first light, or dressing himself in display of his power, assuming he had any. Hiccup did not know if the Berk dragons had their own social hierarchy in the absence of the Red Death.

"Come on, bud," he said, stroking along Toothless's jaw to rouse the dragon from where he had been basking in the sunlight.

The Night Fury cocked his large to the side, studying Hiccup's appearance with uncertain eyes.

"Yeah, it's as uncomfortable as it looks." Hiccup did an odd sort of shimmy as he readjusted the belt around his midriff. "Let's go."

Everyone was filing toward the old arena, re-purposed as a hub for dragon racing and outdoor merriment. The densely packed throngs of Vikings was not nearly as pungent it normally was, thanks to the standard etiquette of bathing before important events. The twins did not seem all that thrilled, scratching themselves where their clean clothes chafed. They wore no furs, but instead, were covered in an abundance of decent leather garb, still looking quite nice, and positively sullen about it. They nodded as Hiccup walked by, then spit into their hands and scrubbed smudges from each other's helmets.

Up ahead, Stoick the Vast stood, proud and well-armored, by his chiseled throne overlooking the old kill ring where dragons used to bleed. That day, only happiness would abound as wide-eyed children finally had dragons to call their own, one step closer to being considered a fully actualized Hooligan.

Hiccup climbed on Toothless, Sharpshot sinking his claws in deeper to the fur that cushioned him. People scattered to give the Night Fury room, almost automatically, without a hitch in their conversations.

Hiccup flew up to join the chief, whose excess of fine armor and sumptuous fabrics made him look prepared to do battle with Thor himself. If possible, the man was more intimidating than usual, even with the ornate beads woven into his substantial beard. Hiccup was certain his regal father could give the god of thunder a good, long fight. Then, they'd probably sit down for a drink and chortle over it, swapping war stories.

Yes. That seemed completely plausible.

"Dad," Hiccup greeted, dismounting Toothless. Sharpshot scurried down his chest until he cradled the Terror in his arms.

"Ah, Hiccup!" the chief exclaimed, patting him hard on the back and Hiccup's knees nearly buckled. "Yeh look yeh could be chief."

Hiccup laughed dryly, forcing a well-practiced, appeasing smile. "Thanks, dad. I guess that's kind of the point." He looked down at the crowd of children, gathered in the arena and jittery with excitement. They gazed around at the swelling crowd, waving to loved ones and friends. Hiccup envied them, wondering what it might have been like if he had gotten to choose Toothless, his father looking on with approval. None of the secrets. None of the lies.

"Yeh and me, creatin' traditions fer this village that will endure for generations." Stoick beamed at him.

"Mmn, yeah. Tradition. I'm all about it," Hiccup muttered.

Stoick chortled again, clapping Hiccup's back as he strode forward with his arms outstretched. His voice was booming, demanding attention in a way Hiccup doubted he ever could. The chatter died down and Hiccup placed Sharpshot back up on his shoulders, standing obediently beside his father like a good and proper heir should. He was flanked by Toothless while his father had no dragon counterpart. Still, in the presence of his tribesmen with all of their dragons, the chief was in high spirits, feeding off the energy of a happy village.

>His father gave a nice speech about youth, responsibility, and the companionship of dragons. Powerful, as most all of his speeches were, but Hiccup was busy scanning the crowd. To the right of his father stood the Jorgensons.<p>

Snotlout and Spitelout wore heavy black cloaks of fur-lined wool, held in place by decorative cloak chains. Their bracers and armbands were flamboyant compared to their normal dress, and it would have been laughable how identical they looked, had his uncle not cast him a scrutinizing glare. Further down the line were other members of his father's council, including the Hoffersons. Specifically, Astrid. Really, the only face Hiccup cared about.

She was beautiful in all-white furs, gilded threads, and simple beading. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, neat and elegant, with tiny plaits feeding into a larger one. How he wanted to touch

it, unwind it, and feel it slip between his fingers. But there was a frown on her face marring the otherwise stunning vision she was. She had impeccable posture in a long azure shift, overlain with a neutral apron-skirt, fastened above each breast with a bronze broach. A simple belt rested at her hips, cinched tight on her narrow frame and hanging loose past the buckle. Hiccup had never seen her dressed so affluently, but he suspected it was a perk of being promised to a wealthy merchant family. Indeed, Stefnir stood beside her in garb so flashy it had to be intentional.

Hiccup watched them, fists clenched. Astrid kept staring straight ahead, hands clasped in front of her as Stefnir held her close with a hand on her waist, making Hiccup's eyes narrow.

The rest of their tribesmen cheered as Gobber opened one of the old stalls that had once served as Hookfang's prison. Instead of a flaming Nightmare, however, young dragons ambled out into the light. There were three of each of Berk's resident species: Nadders, Nightmares, Gronckles, and Zipplebacks. Twelve in all to choose from, for the handful of kids fidgeting with anticipation. The young dragons, just nearing their adolescence, had been handpicked by Fishlegs, who had nearly hyperventilated when Hiccup had passed him the honor that year.

Gobber corralled the dragons into as neat a group as he could, appearing to be the only soul in the village who did not take the formality of the event seriously—then again, his tunic looked like it actually had been washed, free of stains, and perhaps that was as much as anyone could hope for?

Stoick uttered a prayer aloud, asking the Allfather and the goddess of youth, Ithunn, to guide the children and shine wisdom upon them as they selected their dragons.

There were more dragons than there were kids, and inevitably some would be ushered back to the stables without riders. After a time, they turned feral, beholden to no one and returning to the wilderness with nothing on Berk to tether them. But new bonds were formed between the little Vikings and the dragons they selected. Genuine, deep, and beautiful. When first suggested, Hiccup had been a strong supporter of the Selection for that very reason. He knew what it was like to make a real connection with a dragon, and he thought a festival showcasing it was genius on his father's part. He wanted every young Hooligan to one day have that same opportunity.

Even Reyrr Svenson.

The kid was an innocent, and so Hiccup did not harbor any ill will for him, but he did roll his eyes when, predictably, Reyrr chose a Monstrous Nightmare.

Everyone in the Svenson clan owned one, and dragon preference seemed to run in families. It spoke clearly of their values; attributes they cherished. Hiccup politely clapped along with everyone else, shaking his head as the rest of the Svenson clan whopped and hollered loudly.

And then, it was over. The actual ceremony had lasted the span of half an hour, maybe, with all the pomp and circumstance included. It was always short, but that did not mean the festivities were to end.

If anything, it was a very pleasant excuse for the necessity of the following revels. The race came next, and Hiccup saw Fishlegs and the Twins muscling their way into the arena. Snotlout had disappeared from his father's side as well, and Hiccup's heart began to hammer with gathering adrenaline. He and his friends were to do what they did best—"kick ass at riding dragons."

The spectators thinned in the interim as the racers readied themselves, undoubtedly to line up for tankards of ale and cider.

Hiccup plucked Sharpshot from his shoulders and set him on the ground, and the Terrible Terror immediately became interested in a nearby pack of his scaly peers, Astrid's Terror among them, scurrying off.

"Ready Toothless?" Hiccup asked, patting the Night Fury's thick neck.

The dragon warbled and nudged him impatiently as if to say, 'I've only been waiting all damned day!'

* * *

><p>Astrid squeezed between bodies, careful not to tread on the hem of a nice dress, or jostle loose anyone's cloak pin. Stormfly obediently stayed put, reserving her premium seat.<p>

"Excuse me. Excuse me. Sorry!" she repeated inching closer to the arena where her fiancÃ©e and her lover prepped for the race in too close a proximity. They had their backs turned to one another, and though it was midsummer, it seemed an unnaturally cool air blew between them.

"Astrid!" Stefnir said brightly, pausing from adjusting Harbinger's saddle.

His smile was expectant, and she strode over to him with a sidelong glance at Hiccup, but he was busy with Toothless. She tore her eyes away from him for only a moment, to flash Stefnir a dutiful smile as he swept her into his arms. She cocked her head at the last second, and his lips brushed her cheek.

"Good luck," she told him, but there was no sincerity behind it.

"I won't need it," he replied confidently, and Astrid suppressed the urge to laugh.

His hands were on her waist, eyes traveling over her with an uncomfortable intensity. She looked up at her dragon, peering down through the chains with a soft croon.

"Gods, you are beautiful." Stefnir's voice was suddenly louder, and Astrid noticed Hiccup tense, much to her intended's satisfaction.

"Yes, well, I appreciate all the gifts but I'm glad this outfit isn't a regular thing. It's really uncomfortable." She shifted the heavy fur stole on her shoulders.

"That's a shame. It suits you."

Astrid scoffed, examining the long, cumbersome dress. "No, it doesn't. I'd much rather have my tunic and my leggings and myâ€" "

"You'll get used to it," he interrupted, caressing the side of her face. He just grinned, insufferably haughty. "There's more of this to come, once we're married."

Astrid recoiled, face scrunched with her disapproval. "It's not me."

Dismissive as always, he retorted, "It will be."

He leaned in to kiss her again and she wiggled free from his grasp, blurting out the only escape she could think of. "I need to talk to Hiccup."

Stefnir scowled, glancing up at the other young man accusingly. He reached out and sized Astrid's wrist, tight and unyielding. "Why?" he demanded.

Her eyes went ice cold, lip curling in a challenge and her fiancÃ©e puffed up. It might have startled and intimidated her, had she any measure of respect left for him. She could not maintain eye contact. A confession was waiting on her tongue while her head spun another lie. Her lips could claim one truth, but she was certain her eyes spoke another. There was a pull, an inescapable tether between her and Hiccup, and it grew shorter the deeper she fell for him. She felt his presence behind her like the radiant heat of a dragon's flame. Stefnir's indignation barely registered with her, and that false sense of security flared up again. It was a brazen and presumptuous affront to her betrothed when she backed away with a nonchalant shrug of her fur-covered shoulders.

"Wedding details," she answered, and he took a step toward her, "about the ceremonial sword he's forging for us."

"_I'm_ handling that," he declared. He brandished a finger in Hiccup's direction. "There's no reason for you to talk to him."

From the corner of her eye, Astrid saw her lover drop his arms by his side, both limbs bent stiffly at the elbow. He turned toward them, though she could not read his expression in her periphery.

"You need to focus on the race, for now," she asserted. "I'll worry about the sword and youâ€" you just keep thinking up that winning strategy." She turned her back on him just as he was about to protest. "I'll be up there, cheering you on!"

A haphazard wave was all the less than enthusiastic support she could muster.

She ambled toward Hiccup, not too slow and not too desperate. She did not need to glance back to feel Stefnir's gaze boring into her. Hiccup was the enemy and no impending marriage would ever be enough for her fiancÃ©e to trust her around an old flame that, to his knowledge, had fizzled out two years ago. She was always on a proverbial leash, kept in line by Stefnir's unwavering

leer.

"Smooth," Hiccup murmured.

He turned back to Toothless and Astrid sidled up to him. The smirk on her face mirrored his. She wondered how much Stefnir could read in their body language from behind.

"I had to get away. He's had a death-grip on me all morning." Astrid whispered, patting Toothless when he nudged her affectionately. She felt the back of her prickles, as if Stefnir's scrutiny was the breeze bringing goosebumps to her skin. In his mind, there was undoubtedly a confused dialogue—"why was the Night Fury so cozy with her?" Conclusions could be made, not entirely inaccurate.

Hiccup had the foresight not to glance her over as he replied, "Because you look incredible."

Astrid's face split into a broad grin. Stefnir had told her the same thing all morning, but it was insulting coming from him. Possessive. Even though she felt ridiculous and costumed, a simple compliment from Hiccup had unusual sway over her self-image.

"No more than you do, Hiccup. A lovely toothpick, you make."

And he was—gorgeous, really. Never a word she thought would ever apply to him. He was regularly handsome, of course, in his long, unique, oddball sort of way. But that fur cloak on him, the silk trim, and the dark gray clothes—it all worked together. The fine, detailed leather did not hurt, either. He looked—every bit the chief Astrid believed he would become, and it would be utterly dishonest for her to deny it was a turn on. He smiled, bright and obvious, and that gap just added to it all, ridiculously endearing.

"Oh, but you're the prettiest," he teased.

They laughed, tugging at each other's luxurious, but completely uncharacteristic attire.

"Having a nice chat?" Stefnir's voice was low and close, making the two of them jump.

Astrid should have expected it. She was his gem, and she was shining because of someone else, and he could not stand it.

Hiccup rebounded first, standing taller and clenching his fists. "We were."

Stefnir rounded on him, chest swelling again but Hiccup did not balk. The older man was less than a wild dragon, and Hiccup had an almost unshakeable resolve when convinced he was in the right. It did not matter he and Astrid were having an affair. To Hiccup, it was a justifiable affair. In his mind, he and Stefnir were already set to fight, though nothing had been declared officially—but Hiccup wanted it done, and Thordamn anyone who tried to talk him down from a ledge he so ardently wished to jump from. Sweet, but as stubborn as anyone Astrid knew.

"What, ah, details have the two of you worked out?" Stefnir asked

him, something menacing behind the disingenuous manners.

Though he was apt to stutter under most interrogations, Hiccup was surprisingly articulate when there was an enemy to outwit. He easily lied, "Astrid was just suggesting I should wrap the hilt of your matrimonial sword in fine leather. I, uhâ€¦I happen to agree with her."

"Do you now?" Stefnir took a step forward.

Hiccup stood his ground, like he did with dragons, with Alvin, and with Dagur. He was sharpest and the most cunning in such moments, his witty tongue barbed with sarcasm and thinly-veiled insults.

He said, "Yes. I support most of her ideas. She comes up with plenty good ones. Butâ€¦I'm sure you would know all about that since you're so close and everything."

Astrid's breath hitched at his quickly waning subtly.

"And what would you know about it? Or her ideas? Or anything?" Stefnir growled.

"A fair amount. I care about Astridâ€¦about myâ€¦friends."

"Oh? I suppose that's why you've been so distant over the past couple years?"

Hiccup clenched his jaw, muscle twitching visibly. "I had my reasons."

"Well, your friendship is a bit worn."

Hiccup actually stepped forwardâ€¦a half-step, to be exact, but still an advance. His new tone was blatantly abrasive. "_Really?_ Did she tell you that herself or did you just decide that for her, like you do for everything else?"

Stefnir opened his mouth, baring his teeth with a gathering derisionâ€¦but a horn cut him off. One long, blaring note to signal the start of the race, beckoning spectators back to the arena. Gobber limped into the ring, carrying one large basket under his good arm, marked with a red rim, and kicking the other along the ground for the opposing, green team.

"Racers! Mount yer dragons!" he instructed, setting the baskets in the center of the ring. "Astrid, yeh should get goin' now."

She nodded lingering a moment longer while Hiccup and Stefnir stared each other down with palpable contempt. They stripped of their fur cloaks and turned back to their dragons. Hiccup folded his fur and set it neatly on the ground, as did Stefnir and Snotlout.

"Astrid," Hiccup mumbled under his breath, grasping her hand. She felt something cold and metallic squished between their palms. He nodded then let go of her abruptly, climbing on Toothless.

Her fingers curled over the object in her hand, mapping the Strike Class emblem by feel alone. She smiled, clasping her other hand over it before sauntering back to her fiancÃ©e.

"Good luck, Stef," she said in what she hope was a convincing simper. "I'll be cheering for you."

He scowled down at her from where he sat, poised atop Harbinger. "Will you?"

Astrid kept walking, squeezing Hiccup's broach tighter.

* * *

><p>"Oh, come on! That isn't legal!" Spitelout shouted, gesturing wildly at a member of the green team, whose Deadly Nadder had nearly unseated Snotlout with a low hanging claw.<p>

Lap after lap had seen the same aggression. Dragon racing was not a soft and dainty sport, but there had been far more contact that was necessary, or typical. Meatlug had been shoulder-checked by Harbinger, sending her spiraling into a nearby house. She had recovered, but the roof had not. At one point, they had to freeze the match so Hiccup could intervene in a midair fight between Barf and Belch and the other team's Nadder. But perhaps the greatest ugliness was not so apparent. It was festering beneath the surface of a well-played game, a personal grudge between team captains that only Astrid was truly aware of.

Toothless dove and swerve, both to snatch sheep for points and to avoid the tawny Nightmare, tailing him relentlessly. The Night Fury pulled off a spectacular grab, skimming the grass, only to climb into a sudden block by Harbinger. Stefnir grinned down at Hiccup, smug.

"Tuff!" Hiccup shouted and Toothless rolled to be free of the Nightmare. The sheep was airborne, bleating pitifully as it was thrown to the twins.

"The wool is ours!" Tuffnut cried dramatically. Legs locked around Barf's neck, Ruffnut swung from her saddle and caught the sheep, hanging inverted. "The wool is ours!" she repeated.

Another opposing Nightmare was on them immediately, but the Zippleback was too close to the basket. He glided into the arena and Ruffnut sank the sheep in their goal with minimal effort. Gobber marked another point on the wall.

The team captains continued into the next lap, and Toothless shrieked in annoyance at Harbinger's uncomfortably close flying. Astrid could not make out their riders' faces, only the furious beating of the dragons' wings. She glanced down the line. Stoick was sitting on his throne, squirming anxiously with a heavy, intense brow. Beside him, Spitelout was pacing, cheeks puffing with ire. All around her, Hoffersons and Svensons clapped for Stefnir and the green team. She was a silent supporter of the red team, deep in hostile territory.

"Come on, Hiccup," she whispered to herself, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

She wanted to be in it. She would have Stefnir off him in a heartbeat—but she was too precious. Too lovely and soon to be wed.

Too valuable to participate in a contact sport.

The spectators ducked, hands over their heads as Toothless and Harbringer flew by, low and fast. The dragons were merely streaks in the midday sky, powerful and vicious. Astrid clutched her belt where she had tucked in the Strike Class broach for safe keeping. The wind off the dragons blew her hair and clothes about, and as she and the other onlookers straightened up, she heard the chief bellow, "Get 'em, son!"

His encouragement was drowned in tumultuous cheers, people rooting for one team or the other. A horn blew, the black sheep was in play, and Astrid's excitement bubbled up to an uncontainable volume.

She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Finish this, babe!" And there was only one person who really knew to whom she called—the one person it was meant for, and the one person who mattered.

The crowd roared as Fishlegs emerged from between two buildings, cradling the black sheep in his thick arms. His eyes were wide and anxious. He kept glancing back at the opposing dragon riders in pursuit. The other team's Nadder and Monstrous Nightmare tore after him, and poor Meatlug growled with the strenuous flapping of her wings. She looked pained, flying as fast as a Gronckle could, and perhaps faster than was advisable. Hookfang glided in alongside her.

"Fishlegs!" Snotlout shouted, holding up his hands.

The sheep was lobbed and he caught it, just in time for the other team to slam into Meatlug in a tangle of tails and wings.

The poor sheep struggled but Snotlout had an unyielding grip. Hookfang veered away from the trailing dragons, flying low on the final lap to the baskets. Toothless dove to give him cover and, predictably, Harbinger followed.

"TAKE IT TO THE BASKET, SNOTLOUT!" Spitelout pumped his fist into the air, looking like he might explode from the tension. The score was green six to red four, and the black sheep would clinch victory for Hiccup's team.

Stoick was on his feet as well, all composure forgotten. He gestured at the arena as if it could make the young man fly faster. "Go! GO!"

It was Hookfang, Toothless, and Harbinger, out in front. Stefnir flew his dragon in a tight loop, attempting to steal the sheep from above, but Toothless cut between them. Harbringer came to a dead stop, smacked in the face by the Night Fury's tail as he passed. The majority of the crowd applauded, including the chief and Spitelout, practically dancing on the spot like giddy children. The rest of the spectators booed and hissed.

Harbinger recovered, streaking after Hookfang. Large claws seized the red Nightmare's tail, and Snotlout just barely kept himself from being thrown from his dragon from the abrupt stop.

"Foul! FOUL!" Spitelout bellowed, stomping his foot. Astrid could see the bulging of his neck veins from where she stood.

But there were no such things. The only rule in dragon racing was to drop sheep into a designated basket, and the black sheep was worth ten points. All rough-housing was fair and good entertainment.

Stefnir leapt onto Hookfang's tail, scrambling along the dragon's back toward Snotlout. Harbinger firmly held onto the other Nightmare. No matter how desperately Hookfang flapped his mighty wings, he could not move forward. He would not ignite, nor retaliate. There was an innocent Viking on his back, Snotlout not necessarily included in that tally.

"You _dirty_â€"! HICCUP!" Snotlout stood, wobbling precariously and threw the black sheep as far he could.

It fell in a graceful arc, but Toothless was already diving for it. He was a blurred shadow while Stefnir cried, "NO!"

Then Hiccup had the black sheep, and his Night Fury was too fast and unchecked. He soared into the arena while the opposing team could only watched and swear. The resulting screams of red team supporters was deafening and Astrid rubbed along the lump in her belt, biting back a grin. She felt a hand on her shoulder, strong and bracing.

"It's alright, Astrid. It was a close game. Stefnir played hard," her father said.

"I should go see him. Show him support," she said, slipping away.

Only when she was lost among the gleeful crowd, did she finally let out a sharp, relieved laugh, unheard by anyone else.

* * *

><p>"Seriously! What was that?" Snotlout growled. "Did you see how that asshole just attacked Hookfang?"

"I know, right? Or how about the way he kept running into Meatlug?" Fishlegs replied, turning to hug his Gronckle.

"None of that is against the rules," Hiccup told them as they weaved their way through the village. The Great Hall was their destination. Celebratory rounds of ale and mead were called for.

It was a dense pack of Vikings to wade through. Everyone was shopping or tending to their dragons. The few ten-year-olds of the day were congratulated on their new dragonsâ€"on being a Hooligan.

"Well, it would be against the rulesâ€"if there _were_ _any_ rules," Ruffnut droned.

She ducked, nearly getting backhanded by the flailing limbs of drunken Vikings in boisterous song.

"I prefer to sort of just 'wing' it, myself," Tuffnut said, shrugging.

"Well, at least we won. That's a good thing." Hiccup waved as a family called out their thanks for the child's saddle he built. The little girl had been one of the selectees, and she was learning how to properly strap a saddle to her new Gronckle. "They played dirty, so I'm glad we beat them."

"Yeah. It's only fun if we're the ones playin' dirty!" Ruffnut snickered, elbowing him with a wink.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. Sometimes it was ambiguous whether or not she was making passes at him, and he thought it best not to ask.

"Ugh! This leather freakin' chafes!" Tuffnut groaned suddenly, scratching his privates with vigor.

Hiccup glanced down at his own formal attire, mildly rumpled from the game. His fur cloak was draped over his arm. Astrid still had his broach, but she had been intercepted by Stefnir after the game, steered away before she could speak with him. She had glanced apologetically over her shoulder as she was marched back out of the arena, and Hiccup could only watch, sighing heavily.

The racers climbed the steps to the Great Hall, followed by their dragons. Their supporters clapped and whooped as they sauntered through the double doors. Hiccup spotted his father, beaming proudly and raising his mug. Hiccup smirked and rubbed the back of his neck, always feeling small and inadequate under his father's lofty expectations and abundant praise. Snotlout, however, adopted an obvious swagger. Fishlegs stood straighter, reflecting the glow of their tribe's adoration. Tuffnut was more interested in scoping out the nearest mug of ale he could get his hands on. Ruffnut, wellâ€¦Hiccup did not know who she was making those heavy-lidded eyes at, but he was glad it was not him.

They sat at their usual table and they did not have to ask for drinks before tankards were being shoved into their hands. Individual compliments were lost among the noiseâ€”babbling, laughing, and off-key singing. Someone was playing a lute to encourage melodic screeching, and Hiccup tried not to slosh ale onto the fur in his lap as hands jovially slapped his back.

He smiled politely. Nodded in acknowledgment. He tipped his mug to his lips to avoid conversation, but through the fans he noticed a commotion, tucked away in the back of the hall. In the shadows and muffled by the surrounding revelry, Stefnir was berating Astrid. He kept grabbing for her, sharp and aggressive, and she kept wrenching free. She snarled something back at him and his fist struck the wall beside her head. Hiccup was on his feet before he even realized it.

He slammed his mug down too forcefully, because glanced up at him, bewildered.

"What's with you?" he asked, brow quirked.

"That jar of Hookfang's saliva we talked about?" Hiccup led.

"Yaaaahâ€¦?" Snotlout hesitantly followed.

"I'm going to need it as soon as possible."

Snotlout scoffed. "You're crazy, cuz, but whatever." He returned to his drink.

Hiccup was excusing himself from the table, crossing the hall with tunnel vision. A few people tried to get his attention, but the only thing he heard was the distant argument between his lover and her husband-to-be. Well, not-to-be, because Hiccup's breathing was deep and labored, lungs swelling with his anger. Every blow of Stefnir's hand against the wall hurried his pace. Toothless followed, sensing his disquiet, and seeing the frustration on Astrid's face tempted Hiccup to command a plasma blast. He was driven by his burning righteousness, and since Astrid was not in a position to fight for herself against the status quo, he was willing to do it for her. Yearning for the chance, imagining punching Stefnir with a satisfaction that would be uncharacteristic under any other circumstances. He had not intended for such an early confrontation. He was not going to challenge the other man until the morning. But Stefnir's violent hands were too close to Astrid and she was pushing back, and her fianc e grew louder, slapping her hands away from him. Hiccup was out of patience and restraint.

"Stefnir!" he snapped, and Astrid's blue eyes were startled and apprehensive, trapped between her intended's arms.

"You!" Stefnir snarled. With a flick of his wrist, something hard and metallic hit Hiccup in the chest, glinting in the light from the sconces as it fell to the floor. "What gives you the right?"

Rubbing his sternum, Hiccup bent down and picked up his broach, clenching his fist around it. He steeled his gut, feeling the Strike Class sigil digging into his palm.

"I have every right," he replied calmly.

Stefnir gesticulated with a flourish. Scowl on his face littered with condescension. "You hang around like you have chance and it's pathetic. Stop putting ideas in her head! She loves me! She wants to marry me!" He thumbed his own chest emphatically.

"Last I checked a happy marriage is a companionship. Partners  unless I've failed to grasp the concept entirely."

"We are  !"

Hiccup shook his head, glancing instead at his intrigued lover. "Astrid. Do you love him?"

She hesitated for a beat and Stefnir leaned in, tall and solid. She inched up the wall until she was at full height, glaring back at him.

"No," she answered.

He recoiled, fingers trembling as he dragged them over his mouth. His eyes were searing coals.

"Do you want to marry him?" Hiccup continued.

Astrid was cold as winter ice.

"No," she answered again.

"Youâ€|You lyingâ€!" he seized her by the front of her apron-skirt, and _Toothless _growled in response to Hiccup's flaring outrage.

"Take your hands off her, Stefnir," he demanded. "I challenge you to a _holmgang_. Until then, the claim to Astrid is under dispute. She's not mine. She's not yours. So don't touch her."

Astrid flinched as Stefnir snapped the beautiful necklace he had undoubtedly given her with a rough jerk of his hand. Colorful beads scattered on the floor, rolling every which way.

He stalked towards Hiccup, stopping just sort of their chests bumping, like he had done before the race.

He snickered, incredulous, "You really think you can beat me in a fight?"

No, but Hiccup would try his damndest.

"Yes."

Stefnir's nose almost touched his, and he hissed through gritted teeth, "Then I'm going to enjoy watching you bleed."

11. Chapter 11

**A/N: **I call this, "the Dialogue Chapter." It's all pretty much different conversations-important and (hopefully) riveting conversation. The _holmgang_ is in the next chapter. THE FINAL CHAPTER, OMG. Sorry if this chapter is kind of...meh. I've been battling a lot of drama. It's been hard to focus on this consistently. I apologize. Hope you like it anyway.

* * *

><p>"Well, I hope yer proud of yerself," Astrid's mother said curtly, diligently stitching the finishing touches to her bridal gown.<p>

Breakfast was cold, prepared early and left to sit before Astrid's mother had roused her. No eye contact had yet been made, and the temperature in the house seemed to have dropped with her mother's cold greeting. No "hello" or "Good morning." Only derision. It was not a pleasant start to the day, but Astrid found it better than the screaming match of the night before. Word of the _holmgang_ had disseminated throughout the Great Hall by the end of the Selection feast, inevitably reaching her parents and future in-laws. Stefnir confronted Hiccup one more time, to make a scene and set the date and time of the match. Stares and whispers had followed both families as they left the festivities. Astrid's mother had a sharp, tight grip on her arm, like dragon's talons.

It was a brutal interrogation at the Hofferson table, where Astrid sat with her hands clasped and eyes fixed on a notch in the wood

grain.

"How long has this been going on?"

"What are you thinking?"

"We have a contract! Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Did you really think it would be that easy?"

"How long?"

Astrid had tried to answer, only to realize neither her parents, nor Stefnir's, were content to let her speak. So, she sat in silence, eyes downcast as she chewed the inside of her lip, thinking up all manner of biting retorts she would never voice aloud. There was still a thin line of tender flesh around her neck from where Stefnir had ripped the necklace from her throat in his anger. A few times she hazarded a glance in his direction, only to be met with his furious, unwavering stare. He said nothing, rooted to a spot by the hearth, watching her with a simmering ire.

Eventually, she was dismissed with a wave and a disappointed scowl, and she had climbed the stairs to her room with relief and the sickening twist of pent up frustrations and tears. She practically tore off her expensive and stifling clothes, discarding them on the floor without a thought.

In nothing but her undergarments, she had collapsed onto her bed and screamed into her pillow. She had punched the headboard a few times for good measure before flopping onto her back, glaring up at the ceiling. Sneaky came to her side, curling up beside her comfortingly. Stormfly, meanwhile, was Thor knew where. Eventually, Astrid's buzzing mind could not out-race her exhaustion.

Then it was morning, and the mess was still there, waiting to be tackled anew.

"I never meant to upset anyone," Astrid told her mother, stirring her porridge absently. "But you knew I never wanted this marriage!"

The meticulous needle kept stitching its denial, weaving it into the beautiful dress that might never be worn.

"It doesn't matter, Astrid," her mother said firmly. "Ye have the Svensons all riled up. They were askin' if we had planned this, as if we'd do such a dishonorable thing. Our contract with them is bindin'. It was arranged long ago, and whether or not ye want it makes no difference."

"It makes a difference to me!" Astrid argued, dropping her spoon into her bowl with a clatter. Her breakfast, untouched.

"Ach, I swear, child!" her mother huffed, hands falling into her lap. "Ye weren't always this rebellious. When we were at war, ye understood what was expected of ye, but now that ye kids have dragons it's filled yer head with this independence."

"And that's a bad thing?"

Perhaps it was, for the perfectly obedient daughter she had been groomed to be. Someone who did what was expected, never made a fuss, and was steady and predictable. Responsible, by everyone else's definition of the word.

>"Sometimes, I think all of ye kids with yer dragons feel like ye can fly away from yer responsibilities, but some day ye'll need te marry, or learn a trade. There's not a future in careless racin' and dragon academy business," her mother explained, needle coming to life again, guiding gilded thread.<p>

"It's more than that!" Astrid asserted.

Her mother's eyebrows were raised in a haughty arch. "Aye. It's Hiccup, fillin' yer head with the same freedom his dotin' father allows him."

"I never thought I'd hear you speak ill of the chief," Astrid grumbled, leaning back in her seat.

That touched a nerve, and her mother puffed up. "I'm speakin' the facts! This little infatuation ye have is only a passin'â€"!"

A ripple of indignation set Astrid's spine rigidly straight.

"It's not an infatuation!" she snapped.

"Oh, so ye think ye love him, do ye?" Her mother's face split into a dismissive sneer as she tugged another stitch into place. "And in a few years' time, where do ye think that young love will take ye? So sure, are ye, that it will still be there, that yeh're willin' te throw away a good future on a gamble?"

Astrid thought of Dragon's Island, the past few nights in the cove, and the two years of stolen glancesâ€"a summary of their relationship in fragments of memory, some better than others. She remembered fondly the way Hiccup moved over her, his skin warm and damp with a thin sheen of sweat. She would never forget the things he whispered in her ear, breathless and heartfelt in the aftermath, clinging to her like only she could hold him together. There was something deeper there than a mere adolescent fancy. It was an ardent need for each other that sex only temporarily satisfied. Hiccup's eyes were always so honest, candidly speaking of his love for her.

"Don't I at least deserve to find out if something good comes of my relationship with him?" Astrid asked, skin tingling with the memory of Hiccup's reverent caresses.

"Ye deserve te be looked after. Stefnir can provideâ€"!"

"Hiccup is the next chief! So can he!" Astrid was on her feet, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the Haddock house.

"This again!" her mother hissed. Her hands froze once more, all energy channeled into her impatient scowl. "He won't win the holmgang. Ye know that as well as I do, so all of this bickerin' will be moot. Ye'll still be marryin' Stefnir, only now with an all this animosity te start off yer marriage. Is that what ye want fer yerself? I certainly don't want that fer ye." An aggravated sigh. "It's a fine mess yeh've made fer yerself, Astrid. How could ye be so selfish? All

that boy ever did was be excited te call ye his wife. A good match, he makes, and yer tryin' te throw it all away fer somethin' ye don't know will last."

"_Selfish?_" Astrid scoffed. "Don't pretend like this marriage isn't for more money, or that the Svensons aren't marrying their son to me so they have an 'in' with Stoick's council. I'm being expected to go along with this for everyone else's gain but my own."

"Because yer too determined te be miserable in it! Thousands of women have been in arranged marriages before ye. Don't act like yer the first one. Don't act like being happy with Stefnir is impossible. Ye know the state of yer marriage depends on ye."

"I tried to be happy because it's what everyone wanted from meâ€"what you all expected, and I tried to do the right thing. I played along for _two years,_ but I can't anymore. I'm so tired. Mom, it's smothering me." He voice was weary, defeated. More vulnerable than she ever intended to be around her mother.

"Have ye considered the only thing it's smotherin' is yer childishness?"

Astrid's lip quivered and the unshed tears stung. Stomach empty and heart full of anguish. She strode toward the door, wrenching it open and flooding her home with sunlight.

"I would stay away from Hiccup unless yer want te dig a bigger whole fer yerself," her mother said offhandedly, but her eyes snapped up in warning.

Astrid hesitated in the threshold, holding the door open. The distant laughter of children felt like some other world, entirely.

"You know, he could win," she said, and everything in her clenched with nauseating doubt.

"When ye get back tonight, I'll have ye try on yer dress one more time," her mother said, and their argument was punctuated with a slamming door.

* * *

><p>Hiccup's fingers drummed anxiously against his mug, and he watched the water ripple opposed to gazing up at the pacing bear in front of him.<p>

"A _holmgang?_" Stoick thundered in disbelief. His shoulders rolled with his anger; irate gesticulating. "Ye couldn't challenge him te aâ€|aâ€|dragon race, or anythin' else yer actually good at?"

Hiccup glanced up, head still slightly bowed. Scolding and disappointment were nothing new under their roof, but it was never his intention to disappoint his father. That was usually the unavoidable consequence of a series of poor judgment calls. But that time? No. He was in the right, if not for himself, then for Astrid.

He answered, "I don't think there's any legal weight behind dragon races or who can most accurately recite the Book of Dragons by

heart."

His father waved a large hand. "Be serious!"

"I-I_ am _being serious, dad." Hiccup held out his hands in a placating gesture. "What about my face right now suggests that I'm not serious? If I was to challenge Stefnir to some kind of dragon-related contest for Astrid, he would undoubtedly say no."

His father glared down at him with outraged scrutiny beneath bushy red eyebrows, flecked with gray. He was all the more intimidating in the low light, shadows and the glow of the hearth playing across his aging face, emphasizing dark, deep lines. Then he exhaled, long and exasperated. He pulled out the chair across the table, legs scraping over the floor, and sat down with armor clinking and leather rasping. He rubbed his temples with thick fingers, and Hiccup was certain he was responsible for at least half of those wrinkles and wiry strands of gray.

"Hiccupâ€¦" he father murmured, "ye couldn't, fer once, leave well enough alone?"

"Iâ€¦She'sâ€¦She doesn't want to marry him." Hiccup glanced back down at his mug, sloshing its contents idly. "What other recourse is there?"

"Yeh let _them_ handle it! It is _their_ matter te sort out," His father thrust his arm toward the front door, emphatically. "Yeh get married te Hertha, as discussed."

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow. "And that way I get to be unhappy, too? Miserable matrimony all around?"

His father's large hand slapped against the table, rattling his plate. "Ye were fine with it a week ago!"

"No, I wasn't actually," Hiccup mumbled. "That was before I knew a _holmgang_ was a real thing. If it wasn't, Iâ€¦I don't know. You'd have your way. The Svensons would have their way, because my hands would legally be tied. But knowing the holmgang is a real, legitimate solution? I couldn't be compliant after that. I care about Astrid. I want to see her happy."

"It's not just freein' her from her marriage Stefnir, son." Stoick's hand was a knife, cutting through the air with each syllable to follow, "If ye win, the implication is that she's _yours, _te date, te marry."

Hiccup swallowed hard, his mind besieged with images of Astrid sprawled naked beneath him. Her hair was strewn around her head in a haphazard pillow in his bed or on the grass, and her eyes were closed as she mewled his name.

>His name. Never before had he ever been so pleased to hear it. All the times he had fantasized about it fell short of Astrid's actual passionate whisper in his ear. It made him shudder and grip her tighter. She was already his, every bit as much as he was already hers. Had always been hers, really. To claim any different would be a sad delusion.<p>

"Iâ€¦I know," he replied. His eyes traveled up to meet his father

slowly. He hands tightened around his mug with a nervous jolt to the gut. That's..."

His father's eyes narrowed, searching his face in the flickering light. Hiccup had never been a great liar. His eyes gave him away almost every time, should anyone care to look. He winced as his father's eyes widened in realization and horror.

"No," his voice was a plea. It morphed into a threat. "Tell me ye didn'tâ€|"

And there was no need to feign ignorance nor ask for further clarity. Hiccup knew well what his father meant. He pursed his lips and stared down at the man's clenching fists, hearing those knuckles pop. He could practically feel the anger swelling across the table.

His father's voice was piercing. "Do ye understand what yeh've _done?_ If the Svensons or the Hoffersons find out what ye did, the entire terms of the marriage must be renegotiated! Astrid's worth and reputation plummets and the Hofferson are worse off in the bargain, disgraced. Ye have slept with another man's Iâ€"future wife, granted, butâ€|did ye stop and think for one momentâ€"?"

Hiccup held up his hands. "Now that you understand how serious this is, maybe you can help me out? Y'know, some good, fatherly advice?" His father's expression hardened and Hiccup practically fell prostrate across the table. "Come on, dad! You've been trying to make me tougher my whole life. This is actually the first time I need to fight like a Viking."

"Son, my hands are tied. I can't help ye with this. I am the chief and this is a fight set between ye and Stefnir that I have te uphold. I have te stay neutral. This is yer mess, but ye're daft if ye think ye can beat Stefnir Svenson in a fight."

Hiccup frowned, sighing heavily. "Oh, wellâ€|thanks for the vote of confidence. It's not like I'm completely ineptâ€|"

"Confidence?" His father scoffed, rising to his feet to pace again. He pointed a derogating finger. "Ye can't just avoid him the whole match, slippin' away like ye do. Yer goin' te have te engage him. Since when do ye know how te use a sword and shield like he does?"

"_My_ sword, dad. _My_ shield." Hiccup felt like he could not stress that fact enough, for his ingenuity had to count for something. "I've been working all these extra hours in the smithy and I think I'veâ€" "

His father strode for the door with a dismissive wave. "Spare me the details, Hiccup. I can only pray ye survive with all yer limbs intactâ€" "

"Nice," Hiccup grumbled flatly.

The chief wrenched open the door, silhouetted by daylight. He whipped around for the last word. "â€"and that no one else ever finds out what yeh've done!"

He was gone, plunging Hiccup back into the dimness with a furious

slam of the door. Hiccup sneered at glared into the crackling hearth, watching flames and embers spiral up in a cathartic dance.

He was tired. Lying, Astrid's unhappiness, Stefnir's hate, and his father's frustrationâ€”though, he supposed the shouting was better than the cold, silent wind blowing off his father's shoulder by the end of the Selection feastâ€”he wanted it all to end. From one aggravation to another, pretending he had no feelings for Astrid and believing she loved someone else, to being stuck in an illicit affair with crossing blade the only means of rectifying the situation. He was beginning to doubt he could ever be content. There was always something outstanding to gnaw at him, and flying with Toothless or nights with Astrid's body curled around his were his only respite. Young and ignorant, he would have never guessed love could be so arduous. That was not the implication of poem and songs. Love was wonderful and euphoric, they suggested, but Hiccup found it draining.

When was loving someone crime?

Well, perhaps when honest affection were explored dishonestly.

But when he closed his eyes, there were flashes of blue, and the gentle heat of the nearby fire was Astrid's skin on his. The way she looked at him, touched him, and when she told him she loved himâ€”were worth it. He was resigned to do battle with Stefnir because it would be worth everything to be with Astrid openly, to have their relationship accepted.

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair absently. He could hold his own against dimwitted adversaries, but Stefnir would be fast and powerful, skilled in combat as most Hooligans were. His dad would not train him, Astrid certainly could not get away with it, Snotlout would use him as a punching bag and delight in it. The twins and Fishlegs were not even a consideration. He needed someone smart and quick on their feet, intuitive in a fight and powerful as Stefnir would be. Kind of likeâ€”

A dragon.

Hiccup perked up, turning around to grin at his Night Fury, curled up by the stairs. Toothless's drooping eyes snapped open with a curious tilt of his head.

"Hey, bud. Looks like you're going to be my sparring partner."

* * *

><p>If there was one thing Astrid could not stand, it was the gossiping and the intrusive stares that followed her and Stefnir as they stormed through the village. It was bad enough to live the ugliness behind closed doors, but for their personal strife to be dragged out in front of Berk for everyone to see and comment on behind their hands, with whispering of names they did not think Astrid could hearâ€”oh, but she heard them. It was embarrassing and shameful and all the ugliness she never wanted to be exposed. Eyes lingered on her, and there was judgment behind them. Astrid could imagine the accusationsâ€”worse still, that they were true. Her business amplified for all of Berk's sordid entertainment, Astrid was getting a good, hard look at herself through others' perspective, and

she was disgusted and the person she saw. She was. She had been pretending not to be.<p>

"You never answered her last night!" Stefnir growled, jogging in front of her to cut her off. He grasped her arm tightly. "How long have you and Hiccup been conspiring behind my back?"

"We were not conspiring! Not at first," she hissed, wrenching her arm free. No more subtlety. No more passive aggression. What was the point? There were not many secrets left to keep. Her claws came out. No more appeasement and no more sense of duty. No more status quo. There was a possible end in sight, and even if Hiccup was defeated, she could marry Stefnir with all her resentment on her sleeve. Being nice and compliant was a wasted effort now that there was no one's feelings to protect. "Once Hiccup found out about the holmgang, I wished the law was written differently so I could challenge you myself!"

"So, he wanted to fight your battle for you?"

"No, but he certainly wants me free of you. Something he and I agree on."

"Has he put his hands on you? Tell me, Astrid! Right here. No lies!"

She felt her throat tighten and she clenched her sweating hands. "No," she answered. Louder, so the onlookers could hear, she repeated, "NO."

The nosy crowd was erupted into a low hum of chatter.

Stefnir reached for her shoulders and she slapped both his hands away. "Back up," she warned, taking a step forward as well. "I'm not your happy intended anymore."

"It had to come to this for you to show me some passion," he snarled, looking her up and down with new contempt.

"That's right, and it's all hate," she replied, holding her arms wide. "The way you try to control where I go and who I talk toâ€"

"Because I never trusted him!" Stefnir jerked his head toward the smithy where the striking of metal could be heard. It was the only part of the village that did not seem to be hanging on every word of their spat. "Turns out I had every reason not to trust him! I should have tried harder with you. Those looks you gave him, he gave you. I was stupid. I never should have let you anywhere near him!"

Astrid rolled her eyes, sliding her trembling hands over her pulled back hair.

"You can't put a leash on me, Stef! I tried to do the right thing in the beginning, to make everyone happy, but all that got me was deeper into a lie with you! I was losing myself to be the proper daughter and Viking everyone expects me to be! I can't do it anymore. I'm done! I don't love you!"

Stefnir's teeth were bared and he inflated with another angry retort. Instead, he exhaled and grumbled. "Did you ever?"

Astrid was taken aback, and her eyes darted all over his face, searching for a shred of hate to hold on to. He was seething, but hurt. A riled up wounded animal. She answered, "I tried, and that's all I could do."

"I love you!" he snapped like it was insult, vice returning to full volume and proper ire. "I want to marry you! I could make you happy if you'd give me a chance."

Astrid snorted. Lavish gifts bought the adoration of shallow, petty women, and Stefnir could not measure love beyond material wealth and a masculine possessiveness.

"The last two years were your chance, and I believe you gave it your best shot. It just wasn't enough for me," she explained.

"He won't win, though! Then where will we be?"

"Locked in matrimonial despair?" she quipped dryly, hands on her hips.

"When the holmgang is over, and I've wiped the arena with Hiccup's blood, you'll still be mine and I refuse to let what we have die. I've invested too much inâ€"!"

Astrid recoiled, lip curled. "Two years is not too muchâ€"!"

"You've given up on the possibility of us. I haven't," Stefnir retorted, advancing. Astrid held her ground, eyes narrowed challengingly. He was neither afraid nor confident in the face of her assertiveness. "When we flew together and sparred togetherâ€"those hunts we went onâ€"you can't tell me those meant nothing to you!"

Astrid pursed her lips, unable to meet his eye. She could not deny the camaraderie they shared once, when they could be friends and marriage was a distant thought. That was when she had believed in them, foolishly, committed to doing the right thing. If she had any sense of guilt, it was in deceiving that Stefnir, but he had recently stepped aside for a brute of a man.

He was smug. "That's what I thought. There's something here worth fighting for."

"You're crazy. There's nothing here! That's what I'm trying to tell you! What was and what might have been ifâ€"well, that doesn't matter!" she said quickly. "You think, even if you win the fight, my feelings are going to change?"

He leaned in, nose nearly touching hers. One of Astrid's fists were balled and poised to punch.

"Well, we'll just have to see. I'm not going to let you make a fool out of me, Astrid." He nodded decisively, as if he could will the outcome of the holmgang, he strode off. Content with the last word like he always was, in his mind, it was a win if he could bleat the

loudest and the longest.

Astrid folded her arms and glared down at the dirt, biting the inside of her lip. The spectators remained, and she heard the buzz of hushed and hurried conversation. Their stares were like bee stings, pricking her all over. Her face burned and she marched off toward the stables, trying desperately to avoid eye contact with anyone.

Dragons were wonderful creatures, unconcerned with Viking laws and social customs. Stormfly would be the first face Astrid saw who did not want to talk about relationships and scandal. Her Nadder was a reliable companion, never swayed in her opinion of her rider. For a few hours, they could get away from Berk, from the hovering cloud of judgment. There was no doubt in her mind, with the scrutiny of her fellow tribeswomen, there was a small part of Berk, at least, which had painted her as some kind of temptress. She wanted to be up in the skies with her dragon, where she could be just be Astrid Hofferson, no one's fiancée, no one's daughter, no one's walking target of blame and scorn.

>As she walked away from the final resting place of her privacy, the hammering in the smithy grew fainter. She wondered if Hiccup was dealing with his own share of ridicule. At the very least, she hoped each strike of his hammer was forging the clever instrument of Stefnir's defeat.<p>

* * *

><p>"Do ye have some kind of strategy at least?" Gobber asked. "Not that I'm not cheerin' fer ye, but I already made the rings. All this work fer nothin' if ye winâ€|"

He dropped the jewelry on the workbench beside Hiccup, and they might as well have been two solid blocks of lead with how heavily they seemed to fall and demand Hiccup's attention. Jaw twitching, he picked them up, holding them in separate palms because it was an insult to see them rest together so beautifully. Astrid's band was thinner, several links of silver twisted together into a small rope-like pattern, fashioned into a ring. In his other hand, Stefnir's band was thicker, engraved with simple knotwork.

"They're nice," he said dully, handing them back to Gobber. They were placed inside a small, simple box.

The older man shrugged. "Eh. They'll do, I supposeâ€|though, I don't know why ye didn't make 'em. With the Selection over with, yer not exactly drownin' in saddle orders at the moment."

"You know why I can't, Gobber," Hiccup muttered, picking up his hammer and chisel.

Gobber nodded. "Aye, but ye decided te make the ceremonial sword for them anyway, not te mention yer odd piece over there." He nodded to where the nearly finished Dragon Blade laid atop of like sketches. A jar of viscous Monstrous Nightmare saliva sat beside it.

He answered. "I guess I'm in a mood."

Carefully, Hiccup continued engraving the blade in front of himâ€|his prototypical weapon would have to wait until nightfall, when he could work diligently in private.

Gobber had forged the ceremonial blade a couple days prior, and Hiccup had offered to decorate it, not at all in accordance with Stefnir's wishes as they had been lined out to the older smith. It was a long broadsword, and it would be adorned with intricate patterns in the fuller, entwining stylized dragons whose bodies were comprised of knotwork, once Hiccup was through with it.

Gobber scratched his chin, quirking an overgrown brow. "I don't understand. Ye challenge Stefnir, but yer finishin' the weddin' sword for him, and puttin' so much effort into it, too. Isn't that a bitâ€|counterintuitive?"

Hiccup paused, taking the opportunity to crack his tense neck. After a moment, he answered, "This sword is not for him."

He was crafting it for Astrid, truth be told, never to be touched by Stefnir. Never to be used for his vows. It would sit in Hiccup's bedroom, among his valuables for an indeterminate amount of time. But, should anyone come to ask, he was continuing the project for insurance in case he lostâ€|to make sure the wedding could still proceed. It seemed like very few people, if anyone, doubted he would win. It was not quite a farfetched lie.

"Ah," Gobber grunted, though his face was still plenty confused. "Wellâ€|do ye suppose it should be for Stefnir? Plans fer the weddin' are movin' forward as if yeh've already lost. I mean, ye probably willâ€|"

"I seem to recall you once telling me I should fight for Astrid," Hiccup retorted over his meticulous chiseling.

"Did I?" Gobber replied offhandedly.

"Yes."

"Well, clearly I meant before she got engaged and it would cause such aâ€|" The blacksmith's one good hand gestured searchingly. "Kerfuffle."

"You didn't know?" Hiccup glanced up, suspicious.

"About Astrid and Stefnir? Contrary to what ye may believe, Hiccup, yer father doesn't tell me everythin'. Like ye, I assumed it was a lovematch between 'em."

"Well, it's not." More chiseling.

Gobber sighed. "So she loves ye. Perhaps the two of ye could have figured that out earlier and saved everyone a lot of time and grief?" he asked with a wry grin.

"Arranged marriage, Gobber. Remember? Our feelings don't really matter."

"Yes, so let's settle it the old Viking way!" Gobber chimed. "I haven't seen a good _holmgang _since before ye were born."

Hiccup glanced up again, brow furrowed. "Who won?"

"The fiancÃ©, of course," Gobber answered, mumbling around the hand picking at his false tooth.

"Ofâ€¦course?"

"Face it, Hiccup. A man never fights so passionately as when he's fightin' te protect what's his."

Hiccup's gaze snapped back to his work, and his stomach twisted to think of the last time he saw Astrid and Stefnir together, the way her fiancÃ© had bellowed at her, punching the wall next to her head. She had stared up at him with searing hatred, cornered, as she extended him the mercy of her shame. She would not brawl him in the Great Hall during a holiday, and Stefnir had thought he was the one completely in control.

Then Hiccup remembered his own anger, his furious disgust as Stefnir berated Astrid. Only a handful of times could he recall the desire to hurt somebody, and before that Selection feast, the urge was exclusively reserved for anyone who threatened Toothless.

"Yeah," he told Gobber. "I can believe that."

"So, that brings me back te my original question." The man hesitated for dramatic effect. "_Do_ ye have a strategy?"

"I'm going to use the Dragon Blade prototype and my Gronckle iron shield to throw off his game," Hiccup explained. It was as if he was reciting dragon trivia with how easily he rattled off his plan. He had been awake in bed until the wee hours, running over the upcoming fight in his head. "Stefnir's skilled, but he's large. I think I can outmaneuver him. He'll wear himself out."

"Yer assumin' he won't land a cut on ye in the meantime, while yer doin' all yer dodgin' and weavin'."

"Well, I'm not going to assume I'm going to lose, either," he droned. A large hand smacked him in the back of the head and he winced. He spun around, scowling. "What was that for?"

"Fer bein' a dunce," Gobber commented, hobbling his way toward the roaring forge, leaving his former pupil to work bitterly.

* * *

><p>Toothless crouched low to the ground, rolling his shoulders like a cat ready to pounce. Hiccup stared him down, reading his dragon's body language, trying to anticipate his next move. Large eyes studied him as they slowly circled each other by the pond in the cove. The dragon was prepared to spar their third round, but neither one of them had yet made a move.<p>

How serious could they truly be with one another?

Toothless would never hurt him, but the Night Fury would attack non-lethally. Of that, Hiccup was certain, but it would come quick and powerful, and he steeled his gut for it.

Toothless suddenly inhaled and Hiccup dove for his shield that was laying on the ground a few yards away. He had only just managed to

raise it up in front of him when he was hit by a rapid succession of smaller, contained plasma blasts. They were strong enough to knock him on his feet and burn through his clothing. Hel, it would leave a blistering mark on his skin should he be too slow. He would be down for the count, but he trusted Toothless not to seriously maim him—he had not yet—just as much as the dragon trusted him to evade. They knew each other too well. Reading Toothless was as easy as reading a book for Hiccup, but he had no other options or willing participants.

The Gronckle iron shield deflected the dragon's fire easily enough, but the force of the impact had knocked Hiccup on his back. He scrambled to right himself, but his dragon was faster.

Toothless pounced, biting down on the shield and wrenching it off Hiccup's arm. With a flick of his head, it went flying, sliding along the mossy ground some yards away. He then reared back and stomped down, like he was trying to squash an abnormally large insect. One with four legs and leather pants.

>Hiccup rolled from one side to the other, dodging Toothless's claws. He somersaulted backwards, onto his feet. Out from underneath Toothless, he sprinted for his glinting shield, diving again. His knees hit the dirt as his dragon fired another volley of tiny, injure-not-kill blasts. Hiccup gripped the shield tightly, lifting it protectively and he swiveled on his knees. The strength behind even a consciously reduced plasma blast rattled the bones in his body. He blocked the Night Fury's attack, but it knocked him off balance. He tried to stand, but Toothless spun around, swinging his tail like a long, black, scaly whip. Hiccup ducked as it cleared his head by inches, but Toothless tried again, aiming for his legs.<p>

Hiccup tumbled over it, rolling along the ground and using the momentum to push up on his feet. The Night Fury let out a growl of frustration. He did not like to lose.

Hiccup ran at Toothless as the dragon bounded straight for him. The dragon attempted to pounce and wrestle his human to the ground, but every time the Night Fury tried to get a hold of Hiccup, he managed to sidestep or wiggle free.

Toothless sat back on his haunches, taking a couple of swipes at his rider, and Hiccup seized the opportunity to fire the small bola concealed in the center hub of his shield. The weighted rope snagged around Toothless' front legs and his thick neck. He gave an irritated roar as he toppled backwards, the bola throwing off his balance. He flailed on his back for a moment before managing to right himself, immediately firing retaliatory plasma blasts.

Hiccup raised his shield and braced himself, deflecting every blow. Even though the force of pushed him back, he had dug in his feet, real and prosthetic, remaining upright and balanced. Victory to the dragon rider.

"Yes!" He exclaimed, thrusting his fist into the air. "I finally did it!"

It had only taken three rounds and a hope and a prayer.

Toothless, bitter about losing the skirmish, did not share in his enthusiasm. The dragon shook free of his bonds and whipped his tail

around again, connecting with Hiccup's chest. He was thrown into the pond, gasping as he surfaced. The wind had been knocked out of him and he sputtered, swimming for the bank.

>Toothless let out a warble that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.<p>

"Very funny," Hiccup wheezed, climbing out of the water. "You are the worst loser I have ever met, and I would know. Snotlout's my cousin."

Toothless just continued to "chuckle".

"Yeah, yeah. Sticks and stones, and all that," Hiccup sighed, walking forward to pick up the discarded bola. He wound it back into the center of his shield.

The Night Fury curled up on a sunny patch of grass, watching his human with mild interest. When his ears perked up and his snout turned skyward, Hiccup took notice of rattling leaves and the soft beat of wings overhead. A shadow hovered over him, and he squinted up into the sunlight. A dragon was descending gracefully, and he knew it was Stormfly before he even made out the spikes on her tail.

"Am I ever glad to see you," Astrid said, patting her Nadder absently.

"How did you know I was here?" Hiccup asked as she dismounted. Their dragons conversed in the peculiar way they always did—some sort of head bobbing equivalent to a secret handshake and indistinct warbling.

"I didn't. I've been out on Stormfly all afternoon and I saw you down here."

"Had to get away from the village?" Hiccup asked, setting his shield down as she strode toward him.

They embraced, briefly. Astrid pulled back and she looked as spent as he felt.

"Hiccup, it's awful. Whispers and stares everywhere I go. Gods only know what they're saying," she ran her finger through wind-tousled bangs.

She gazed up at him, her brow wrinkled and her eyes filled with distress. He felt a stab of guilt. Only a day ago, she was still held in such high regard around Berk. Everyone beamed at the bride-to-be. He found it nauseating at the time.

"I'm sorry," he told her, gripping her arm loosely. "I feel like this is my—" "

She scoffed, shaking her head and taking a step toward him. "It's both of us. Don't think I'm going to let you take all the blame for it." She glanced away, eyes dark, and added, "You're already fighting my battle for me."

He took a step toward her that time. His hands migrated to her waist and he pulled her closer. "If we're in this together it's our battle, isn't it? Whether you fight or I do, does it really

matter?"

Her hands fell to his chest and she huffed. "You know what I mean! It should be me in the ring, going at him with my axe. Not you and your shield andâ€|whatever else you're throwing together in the shop."

Hiccup frowned. He could deal with just about everyone else's negativity, but Astrid wanting to take his place and fight on his behalf on her behalfâ€|well, it was disheartening if coming from a place of doubt. He needed her support to bolster his own occasionally wavering confidence.

"You know, it's getting pretty exhausting that no one seems to think I can win," he deadpanned.

She took a deep breath. "You've pulled off some pretty crazy stunts, Hiccup, I'll give you that. The Red Death, all those wild dragons we've face, Dagur, butâ€|I don't want to sit by and watch you get hurt." Her eyes flickered to his prosthesis, then back to his face. "Not again. Not for me. It's all wrong."

Astrid, so proud, so determined to save herself. He understood, but there was nothing for it.

"I don't want to sit by and watch you marry Stefnir. If this fight fixes that, then I'm alright with it."

She rolled her eyes, picking idly at the lacings of his tunic. "You make it sound like this is just some other dragon-related problem you can solve."

"It is a solution. Maybe not asâ€|easy or clean as we would've hoped, but it's the only chance we've got and it's worth taking or things continue along the same, dismal trajectory. I can'tâ€|not do this, Astrid."

She smirked. "Hiccup, the boar-headed optimist?"

He grinned. "More like pragmatist."

She closed the space between them, hugging him tightly. It felt incredible, and his arms came around her at once. Astrid, pressed against him, her face in the crook of his neckâ€|that was how it needed to be in Berk, in front of everyone, without the scandal. For the past two years, they should have been free to explore such affection. The holmgang was a gamble with his blood but he would risk every drop for the two of them to be together. A busted nose and broken bones would be less painful than continuing on like they had been before Dragon Island and never knowing a shred of their complicated happiness.

"My parents are keeping a close eye on me," she murmured, her breath tickling his throat. "In the village, everyone's watching all the time now, like this sad situation is some big spectacle. I don'tâ€|I don't think it's wise to sneak out at night. I don't think we shouldâ€|"

The words stung but it was the prudent choice to make. He had been having similar ideas swirling in his head after the argument with his

father, but he did not want to give them any credence. Still, they were under close scrutiny, and to a Viking like Astrid, name and reputation meant so much. He could not smear it for his own desires.

"I, uhâ€¦I agree," he said, and his body was already crying out at the future loss of her. "This has put enough trouble on you and I don'tâ€¦"

"I'm not some damsel, Hiccup," she growled, pulling back. She poked him in the chest with a sharp fingernail. "I'm not the only person whose feelings matter in this. It sucks that it has to be this way, but don't make it sound like I've the most to lose when you're the one going into the ring."

He sighed, shaking his head. "I know you're not a damsel, but I love you. Am I not allowed to care?"

She stared at him for a moment, then bowed her head, tucking it under his chin.

"Well, I guess_ I _have to worry about _you_, then," she muttered grudgingly. "You're obviously not going to do it." She was silent for a moment, hand rubbing his chest over the leather. He felt her lips graze his neck and his eyes fluttered closed. "Promise you can win this?" she whispered. "Not for my sake, not to free me from some terrible marriage, but so that my fiancÃ© doesn't chop you into pieces."

Her fingers were already on his belt, and he kissed the crown of her head before untucking her fitted top from her skirt.

"I promise. I'm going to win this," he said firmly, and though he could not honestly promise any such thing, he would fight as if that vow meant everything.

"Hiccupâ€¦"

Their lips collided in a hot, deep kiss. They wasted no time, tongues brushing sensually as they began their awkward stripping. Eager hands tore at each other's clothing as their dragons frolicked carelessly. It would be the last time for a few days, hopefully not for good. Somewhere in the back of Hiccup's mind, it registered that their affair might continue should he lose. That all of the pain and bitterness in their lives could persist, business as usual. But as her breast binding hit the ground, Hiccup hoped whenever he put his hands on her again, she would be completely his to do so.

12. Chapter 12

****A/N:**** This is it, you guys.

I've put my heart into this rewrite, and continued to learn and grow even through this process. There are still things I'm not completely happy with, but that's part of never being satisfied, right? Things I wish I had done better in hindsight, but had to walk away from eventually.

To my veteran fans, thank you for sticking with me and having faith

as I gave a story you already loved a facelift! I appreciate the faith in me, and I appreciate your support and encouragement. To my new fans, thank you for giving me a shot! Hopefully, you'll stay aboard this crazy train as it rolls on to the next stop, Vetrnaetr. Restock the Nutella, though. You're going to need it. There will be plenty of things from this story that bleed over into the sequel. Unlike last time, Stefnir doesn't just disappear after this. He's an OC, he's part of my Berk. He'll be around, so keep that in mind.

Here we go.

* * *

><p>Astrid could not sleep. The rising sun would bring the holmgang with it, and no amount of tiredness eclipsed that single, worrisome reality. It did not matter that her body was sluggish and her eyes itched with exhaustion. Her mind was wide awake, anxiously racing. Curled up under the covers, or sprawled out with them kicked to the foot of the bed, made no difference. Neither did lying down, nor sitting up with her legs dangling. She was a prisoner of her mind. All manner of scenarios, probable or not, were the unyielding iron bars that kept her.

She dwelled on the worst possible outcomes and paid little heed to the best. Any optimism quickly gave way to the thought that Hiccup was a defensive fighter, if not on Toothless, and the holmgang was an offensive match. Her fianc  was a fearsome opponent who was unlikely to stop at first blood. Stefnir wanted a decisive win. He was going to make an indisputable statement that he was the superior man. Hiccup could not dodge his way to victory.

Not that time.

With an aggravated sigh, Astrid rolled out of bed. Remaining horizontal was doing her little good.

Her Terrible Terror stirred as she paced, the floorboards creaking beneath her feet. Astrid was right over her parents' bedroom but she did not care if she woke them in her restlessness. Years ago, they had made a decision about her future without her input. It had been done with the best intentions, but the arrangement persisted in spite of her protests once she had reached proper age. Parents always thought they knew better, and that a promise made before personalities even developed was still binding somehow. It was for her betterment so she could prosper in life, her mother claimed an antiquated practice, since death did not come as early to the young men of Berk in the years of peace with dragons. Many outstanding contracts had been dissolved, but not hers. Not when there would be mutual gain for both families involved. The Svensons were a safe bet, an investment. Hiccup, a gamble.

But she loved him. She came alive for him. She would rather risk and fail with Hiccup than spend an entire lifetime pretending with Stefnir, gazing across the Great Hall at the new chief and his strange wife from a strange land, wondering what might have been.

She wandered over to her window, opening the shutters to gaze out at the sleeping village. It was dark and still. The moon hung low above

the sea, slipping away with the last hours of the night.

She loved her village and her people, but at the same time, she hated them. Before Stefnir, everyone seemed to be on board with her and Hiccup. Passersby would nudge one another and nod in their direction, smiling fondly and knowingly at the blossoming friendship between them—but then she was in an arranged marriage. Suddenly, everyone was behind the union between the Svenson and Hofferson clans, believing it was more than what it was—just political maneuvering. Two families of influence and repute, a marriage between them garnered much excitement. She and Hiccup, suddenly seen as just a youthful fancy, fell from Berk's collective consciousness. Until the _holmgang_. Thier relationship was at the forefront of everyone's mind again, but it had become scandal.

Astrid folded her arms, leaning on her window frame. The chief's house was a beacon in the distance, solid black, but calling to her like the most enticing _n  cken_ song. Hiccup's fingertips gliding over her skin would set the tempo, and their murmurs in the dark would be the melody, bodies pressing and rubbing together in alternating crescendos and diminuendos.

She did not necessarily want to go to him for sex. Simply lying with Hiccup, wrapped in his body heat and lulled to sleep by his rhythmic breathing, was a pleasant enough fantasy. There was a level of safety and comfort with him she did not realize she had been missing. Not that she needed any protection beyond what her axe and dragon provided, but there was something to be said for the satisfaction of a lover's embrace. No stresses or concerns would slip through Hiccup's arms. Astrid's mind could find time to rest as the world dissolved outside of his bedroom.

But that was only daydream. They had agreed not to see each other and risk further fanning the flames of outrage. It was only her brain that kept her indoors, while her heart and her body were ready to throw caution to the wind and go to him. In such times, she cursed common sense, for there was no guarantee Hiccup could clinch victory in the fight to come.

Her eyes flickered to the Svenson house. If Stefnir won, all her nights would be spent in his possessive hold. She would go to bed, terrified her husband might want her. She would wake up beside a man for whom she felt no affection. Repeat.

Every hope she had for the future, for guiltless kisses and the end of the sneaking around, rested on Hiccup and whatever invention he had slapped together to give him an offensive edge. It would be maddening to be a bystander in her own fate, to watch as her fianc   took violent swings at her lover on her behalf. She was to be fought over like a piece of meat. It was an affront to her pride and dignity for Hiccup to fight in her stead, but the _holmgang_ was an old law based on old values, before dragons were even enemies and women had proved their worth as warriors.

Astrid sneered, turning away from the window with one last contemptuous stare at the Svenson home. She slipped on her boots and grabbed a bundle of clothes and bathing essentials. If she could not get to sleep, she might as well do something productive. There would be plenty of privacy in Berk's nearest stream before the sun rose in another hour or so. The cold water would be invigorating, giving her

the alertness she would need to get through the rest of the dismal morning. Perhaps it would wash away some of the tension, though she doubted it. The _holmgang_ would be like watching the Red Death battle all over again.

She could only hope the outcome would be different, that Hiccup would walk away a whole.

* * *

><p>"They're all staring at you," Tuffnut mumbled, conspicuously swiveling around his seat to survey the rest of the Great Hall. "I mean, really staring. Judging, probably."

"Thank you for that, Tuff. It's not like I can't feel the stares boring into me or hear the whispers," Hiccup replied flatly, poking at his breakfast with little appetite. "It's something I'm accustomed to."

"Yeah, but that's when you were a screw-up," Tuffnut said. "This is kinda different."

Hiccup frowned, glaring up at the blonde. He could not then avoid the surrounding tables of Vikings casting him grim, sidelong glances. Faces that, not too long ago, smiled at him brightly around the village were distant and suspicious. His eyes snapped back to his lap and the sheath lying across it. His fingers traced over the grip and the pommel of the hidden Dragon Blade. He inhaled bracingly.

It was only a prototype and it seemed to work for him, but if there was ever a time he needed an invention of his _not_ to malfunction, the impending fight had to be it.

"I don't get what the big deal is. You're giving them a brawl. They should be kissing your scrawny butt!" Snotlout remarked, gesticulating with the spoon in his thick hand. "So what if you're breaking up another guy's marriage, whisking away his bride-to-be, ruining his life? What do they care?"

Hiccup wrinkled his nose, glancing up at his cousin fleetingly. "While that's not exactly how I would phrase itâ€|you know what this village is like, Snotlout. We're a tribe of Vikings that hate to challenge the status quo."

His cousin blew a derisive raspberry.

"Status quo, status schmo," Snotlout scoffed. "There's gonna be a good fight out of it, assuming you last likeâ€|five minutes." He shrugged his shoulders, stuffing his spoon in his mouth.

"Hiccup, do you actually think you can beat Stefnir? I mean, he's been killing dragons since before the rest of us even went into dragon training. This is what he does," Fishlegs spoke up, putting his large hand on Hiccup's shoulder with concern.

"I'm aware of that, Fishlegs. I, uhâ€|I have a plan. Sort of."

Snotlout cackled, slapping his thigh. "Oh, man! Stop what you're doing everyone!" he shouted to the surrounding tables, cupping his

hands around his mouth. "Hiccup has a plan!"

Several people turned around, puzzled. Others, indignant.

Hiccup set the Dragon Blade on the table, leaning over to hiss, "Would you stâ€™!"

"Big surprise. You have a plan," Snotlout finished, grinning. His eyes flickered to the strange weapon across from him.

Hiccup sighed heavily, knocking his cousin's hand away when the other young man reached over to touch the Dragon Blade. Snotlout yelped and rubbed the back of his hand, eyeing Hiccup with reproach, unaware his clumsy fingers had nearly flicked at very crucial switch on the grip.

"I'm just a little confused, you know? I thought Astrid and Stefnir were pretty close." Fishelgs scratched his large chin. "You used to sulk about itâ€™"

"I didn't sulk," Hiccup deadpanned.

Tuffnut chuckled, shaking his head. His arm fell across Hiccup's shoulders and Hiccup recoiled. "You were the sulkingest Viking I've ever seen."

Snotlout snorted. "Yeah. No one was buying that 'I don't care Astrid has a boyfriend who isn't me' line of yakshit you were feeding everybody."

Hiccup furrowed his brow, transparent once again. He could deny it, but what would be the point? Why pretend he had ever fallen out of love with Astrid? He would soon cross blades with her fiancÃ©, rendering any and all "might or might not have felt this or that" rather moot. So, nobody else believed he had ever stopped caringâ€™but he had believed it for a time. As had Astrid. Somehow they had only been deluding themselves and each other, caught up in their own self-pity to see things with a clear perspective.

Two years wasted by determined stupidity.

"Well, I hope you win." And it was sincere and full of confidence.

"Thank you, Fishlegs," Hiccup said.

"Iâ€™|It would be kind of nice to have the whole gang back together again," the larger boy admitted sheepishly.

Hiccup could empathize. Everything had been on a downward spiral over the last two years and his bitterness had played its part, in retrospect. A wall did not just keep one soul out. It repelled everyone.

"Well, I don't care either way. I mean, I don't necessarily want you to die or anything, though Stefnir looks pretty committed to end youâ€™|but if you lose, I get three silvers and sweet Stoker Class broach from Gutsav. So, you knowâ€™|don't try too hard," Snotlout said casually, not the least bit ashamed.

Hiccup shook his head, not entirely sure he had heard his cousin correctly. "What?"

"Oh, Ruffnut's taking bets," Tuffnut answered offhandedly, picking at some dirt underneath his fingernails.

The calm acceptance of that fact by everyone else was jarring.

"On whether or not I'll lose?" Hiccup retorted, feeling himself puff up with indignation.

"No just that! Whether you'll last a minute," the male Thorston chimed brightly.

"Two minutes," Snotlout snickered.

"Five minutes" Here." Ruffnut appeared at her brother's shoulder. She sat down beside him and smoothed out a long piece of parchment on the table. "Sven just bet a dozen eggs he'll last at least five."

"Sucker," Tuffnut replied.

"You guys!" Fishlegs remarked, appalled, and Hiccup was glad at least one person was on his side.

"What? We're capitalizing on a golden opportunity," Ruffnut responded.

"By taking bets on whether or not I will literally die?" Hiccup asked.

"No! Not die! No one's betting you'll _die_" Oh, except Evert. He's betting a yak. Wow. He's got no faith in you at all. Said you don't stand a chance without your dragon," Tuffnut replied, skimming his finger over the list of bets his sister had collected.

"Wait, you're reading that wrong." Ruffnut swatted him impatiently. "It says 'an inch from death'. So no. No one's betting you'll literally die, only kind of die." She smiled up at Hiccup, as if the clarification made him feel any better.

Hiccup massaged his temples. Maybe he should have left Berk with Toothless all those years ago. Staying did not seem beneficial for his health or sanity.

"Hiccup why are you even doing this?" Fishlegs asked, his voice a nervous squeak. "I mean, I know you care about Astrid but was she really so unhappy? Isn't all of this a bit drastic?"

"Her marriage to Stefnir is arranged, Fishlegs. She never said anything to any of us because she didn't think there was anything that could be done about it. So, silently enduring instead of making a fuss was her way of making it all easier," Hiccup explained.

"Well, it did, didn't it?" the larger boy responded, his eyebrows bowed apologetically as the words left his mouth.

Hiccup pursed his lips. Others has been so readily accepting. He

could only remember how badly it ate at him. So many nights he had spent flying on Toothless to leave his anguish on the ground. Then, he would see Stefnir and Astrid together, seemingly happy, and his stomach roiled with despair and contempt until he had manage to squash it under a rigorously maintained apathy. It was not any better than the raw pain of it all, but at least he could function, stiff and detached.

"For everyone else. Not for her. Not for me. I loveâ€"

Snotlout and the twins hissed loudly, covering their ears and contorting their faces.

"Ugh. Gross. Spare us. Who cares about who feels what for whom?" Snotlout remarked, waving his hand dismissively. He seemed affronted. _Aghast_ anybody might discuss the sensitive subject of feelings in his presence. "There's going to be an awesome fight either way. All I care about is whether or not somebody gets some good hits in. Screw the reasons for it."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "Your support is remarkable," he replied with a flat sarcasm. "Truly."

"Look, Hiccup. You like Astrid?" Tuffnut interjected, suddenly serious. Or rather, as serious as he could be, which usually preceded some kind of inanity.

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow. "Yes."

"And she likes you, right?"

"_Yes._"

"Then we're with you," Tuffnut said decisively, leaning back with a satisfied grin.

Hiccup was taken aback, but the reassuring nods of Fishlegs and Ruffnut touched something in him. His friends had faded into the background in light of all the recent turmoil, not forgotten, but not a priority. After the past few days of being told how wrong he was, he had never been more appreciative of the camaraderie they all shared.

"I don't know." Snotlout began. "I really want my three silver pâ€"Gah!" He jumped with a grimace. Ruffnut was sitting across from him, hands balled to fists. She had lurched forward a bit and there was a dull thud beneath the table that had silence Snotlout most effectively. He glared at her, hunched over as he rubbed his leg beneath. "_Fine_. Yeah. I guess we're with you. Go out there and win or something."

"Thanks," Hiccup said, smiling.

But it was all just a little too late to bolster his confidence.

A horn blared, loud and distant, and his heart sank. Normally, it was a call to gather spectators for a dragon race, but to Hiccup, it sounded like a call to war. He did not have the combat skill that Stefnir did, but he was armed with a few tricks and his resolve. It would have to be enough. For Astrid, it could be enough.

Instead of excited cheers that accompanied game day, the Great Hall was filled grim murmurs. With a deep breath, Hiccup rose to his feet, keenly aware of the stares in his direction. Across the room, Stefnir was also standing. They locked gazes, and it was as if the challenge had just been set all over again.

Tuffnut spoke up, and Hiccup only barely heard him over the blood rushing in his ears.

"But, you knowâ€¦if you can stand itâ€¦a broken nose wins us a new scale brush for Barf and Belch."

* * *

><p>Astrid had stayed with Stormfly as long as she could, keeping her Nadder company in her stall after their morning flight. She did not want to be out among the rest of her tribe, hearing talk about who might win, or pretending not to notice the accusatory looks that followed her. She was too tired for it, wanting only to watch the fightâ€"to support Hiccup and nothing more. It still boggled her mind how anybody could think she wanted things to turn out like they had. How could anyone think she would be content to be a spectator instead of in the damn ring? As much as Hiccup wanted to defeat Stefnir for the sake of their relationship, he could not swing his sword with half the resentment Astrid felt. He wanted to win, but he could possibly feel the urge to punch Stefnir in the face as severely as she did.

She heard the horn and felt her stomach twist with dread. Hiccup could win, but he could also lose. If he fell to Stefnir, his injuries ultimately counting for nothing, Astrid would never be able to look at him again, much less touch him again. The overwhelming guilt would sear her if she triedâ€"and what was worse, Hiccup would never blame her for it. For anything. It was just problem-solving to him, doing what had to be done for a dilemma they had made for themselves, fighting to free her from a situation in which they were both complicit like it was some inevitable duty of his.

Absurd, all of it.

"No matter what happens, at least I'll still have you, girl. We'll still fly tomorrow," Astrid cooed, patting Stormfly before locking up her stall. "Keep Toothless company, in the meantime."

The Nadder growled like she understood, and Astrid cast a pitying glance at the agitated Night Fury. He paced in the center of the chamber like a caged animal, oddly naked without Hiccup's saddle and his prosthetic tail. Astrid was certain the dragon did not understand all the fine details of the web his human sought to untangle, but Toothless understood something was happening, and Hiccup was involved, and it was not good. He tossed his head with an impatient snort.

The stable master watched him warily and Astrid was not sure Toothless could be stopped if he decided to intervene, but the dragon had been confined to the stables during the match with the hope that he might obey. He had been there since Astrid and Stormfly had returned from their flight, and the only feasible reason he had stayed put was because Hiccup must have told him to do so, for there

was no one else Toothless would really heed. He was a dragon as stubborn as his rider, and just as exclusive.

But maybe she could reach him. She and Toothless had always gotten along, rocky introduction notwithstanding. She wanted to soothe him because she could do little else to help Hiccup as he fought her fianc . Mollifying his dragon, very much a half of his own heart, would be the one favor she could return.

"Toothless  hey," Astrid murmured, approaching the Night Fury slowly, "it's alright."

The dragon turned to her, head cocked slightly. She reached out and placed a hand on his snout and his pupils rounded, features softening. He gazed at her quizzically, but leaned into her touch. His nostrils flared and he warbled a question, one that perhaps Hiccup would have been able to translate.

"You have to stay here, okay? You can't help Hiccup this time," Astrid explained. For there was nothing else that could disconcert Toothless quite like being separated from his human. It was ingrained in him to defend Hiccup, and to keep him in the stables was denying him an instinctive protectiveness. She could see the Night Fury process her words, ears perking up at the sound of familiar name. He was thinking, clever and intuitive. "That's right. Stay. For _Hiccup_. You understand, don't you? _Hiccup_ wants you to stay here."

Toothless considered her, then he sat down, wings drawn loosely against his body. His whole posture seemed to droop, resigned. There was a pitiful rumble in the back of his throat, and he was addressing Astrid, _pleading_ with her.

"Oh, Toothless. I know exactly how you feel," she said, feeling her chest tighten. She was bound too, not by caves, but by an old piece of parchment that dictated Hiccup had to be the one risking life and limb. She turned to the stable master, tucking her hair behind her ears with shaking fingers, "There. That  That's how you talk to him. He doesn't really listen to anyone other than Hiccup, so you have to appeal to  "

The horn sounded a second time for the stragglers.

"Aye  but I reckon ye have a match te go watch," the man replied bitterly, "while I'm stuck here babysittin' _one_ dragon. Consider yerself lucky  "

Astrid hurried by him with a brusque, "I'm not getting any enjoyment out of this!"

She paused on the stairs, glancing back at Toothless. The Night Fury was curled up on the ground, defeated in a way he should never be. His head came to rest on his folded claws and Astrid could see his body expand and deflate with something akin to a sigh. He made another noise, soft and plaintive, and she had to leave before she fell to her knees beside the dragon to comfort him, feeling sorry for the both of them, missing the fight entirely.

It was evident that there was more than just a carefree relationship hinging on the outcome of the _holmgang._

* * *

><p>Hiccup stood on one side of the arena while Gobber ushered Stefnir to the other. Calls from the crowd were one indistinct mass of noise and jeers, and there was nothing to be gained by determining how many people were cheering for him, and how many were supporting his opponent. He did not dare look up to see familiar faces, grinning with support or scowling at widely his perceived selfishness. Berk was a writhing sea of colors above him.<p>

Stefnir was already staring him down with a cold glare meant to be piercing, meant to rattle him. Hiccup exhaled, a single puff of air through tight lips. Stefnir cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders, baring his teeth while the spectators egged them on with more fervor. Hiccup unsheathed the Dragon Blade, tossing the leather aside. He picked up the Gronckle iron shield at his feet, gripping it firmly.

"Hiccup!"

He gave a start, glancing toward the lowered gate. He felt his spirits lift considerably as Astrid peered in through the bars, anxious and breathless, but there. For him, looking at him. He smiled, and she managed a small echo of a grin. The match had not yet started. Vikings were still filtering in to watch, and so he went to her, ignoring whatever threat Stefnir had just yelled at his back.

"I was beginning to think you might not watch this," he told her. People in the crowd were shouting at him too, but he could not care less.

"Of course, I'd be here," she replied, exasperated.
"Justâ€"

"Hiccup! I need ye back in the startin' position," Gobber called, waving him over.

Hiccup nodded, but turned back to Astrid. "Last time we were like this, I was about to face Hookfang. To be honest, I'd still rather face a dragon right about now."

"Hiccup!" Gobber snapped impatiently.

"Win," Astrid demanded, reaching through the bars to curl her fingers in his tunic.

"Iâ€|I can," he wavered.

"Hiccup!" Gobber just about bellowed, the energy of the surrounding crowd swelling to almost drown him out.

"Win!" Astrid exclaimed, eyes locked on Hiccup's with conviction.

"I'll tryâ€_mmphf_!"

Astrid pulled him in and their lips met, warm and earnest, as his cheek grazed over a cold metal bar. It was brief and fretful kiss,

and almost as quickly as she had initiated it, Astrid was pulling away. She untangled her fingers from him, jaw clenched. He took a step back, blood hot with resolve. With one, small reassuring nod, he strode back over to the start position.

Stefnir's lip was curled with disdain and Gobber stood between them, arms outstretched.

"That's the last time you put your lips on my wife," Stefnir hissed through his clenched teeth.

"She's not your wife," Hiccup corrected delighting in the other mans' rising anger. He was red and unsettled. Less focused. "She won't ever be."

"Now, now," Gobber muttered. "Save it fer the fight." He cleared his throat and spoke loudly, his voice reverberating off the stone walls for the spectators to hear. "The rules of the holmgang are simple! Each Viking gets one shield and one sword of his choosin'. They will fight 'til first blood is drawn!"

"Actually, I would like to amend that rule," Stefnir spoke up. He did not take his predatory stare off of Hiccup as he said, "I propose we fight until a clear yield!" He then added, for only Hiccup and Gobber to hear, "I would ask for a death match, but I hardly think your father would allowed it, as supposedly neutral as he is."

"Hey nowâ€" Gobber tried to interject.

"Until a yield is fine by me," Hiccup replied, fist tightening around the grip of his blade. "We'll settle this permanently. This fight needs to be the end of it."

Gobber cast Hiccup a sideways glance as if to remark on his insanity, but he shook his head and addressed the crowd. "The rules have been amended te a fight until a yield!" There were dissenting cries from the spectators. "Do both of yeh agree te the terms of the fight?" Gobber asked, glancing between Hiccup and Stefnir.

"Yes," Stefnir answered, narrowing his eyes and standing straighter.

"Agreed," Hiccup replied, calmly. He was hyper-aware of everything, the flexing of Stefnir's muscles and every subtle shift of his stance. Hiccup's heart was beating so anxiously, he felt it in his throat. If he had doubts, he was passed the point of no return. For Astrid, for their freedom, he hoped he had not underestimated the other man.

"Well, let's get this thing started!" Gobber exclaimed, letting his arm fall in a decisive arc before quickly limping out of the way to stand by the gate.

Hiccup swallowed thickly and dug in his heels. He raised his Gronckle Iron shield as Stefnir let out an angry battle cry, charging at him. As much speed and power as he had, Stefnir was no Night Fury, and Hiccup leapt out of the way, dodging the swing of his sword like it was a swipe of his dragon's tail. Hiccup internally thanked every god he could think of that he had taken the time to train with Toothless in the weeks leading up to match. At least he was prepared, but one

evasive maneuver did not a victory make.

Stefnir swung his other arm around, slamming his shield into Hiccup's with a force that rattled Hiccup's bones. The other man threw his body weight behind his shield-arm to knock Hiccup off balance before swinging his sword in a downward arc. The metal of his blade rang shrilly against the Gronckle Iron plating.

Astrid had not been exaggerating when she had warned Hiccup of her fianc 's strength. The impact from each of blow thrummed through every nerve and muscle fiber Hiccup employed to repel him. Every bit of pressure was fueled by a hatred and bitter maliciousness that Hiccup, though he harbored his own dislike for Stefnir, did not return with equal potency. That was one vital difference between fighting Stefnir and fighting Toothless "Hiccup's loyal dragon had never tried to kill him. There was a ferocity Stefnir's moves that Toothless would not replicate in their sparring matches. It made the other man wild and unpredictable. It made him lethal.

Hiccup blocked a strike aimed at his face only to notice Stefnir do a sort of half-step backwards to swing the blade at his legs. Hiccup managed to jump back out of reach but he lost his footing, stumbling into the cold stone wall behind him. Stefnir seized the opportunity, casting his shield aside and sprinting at him with his sword clutched in both hands to run him through "so much for a non-death match! Stefnir's brutality had taken over, learned behavior from years of fighting dragons. Hiccup could see himself reflected in his opponent's eyes, no longer human, but prey every bit as dangerous to Stefnir's ideal future as a dragon used to be to his physical wellbeing.

Hiccup's breath caught and he allowed his knees to give out, dropping to the ground and hearing the screech of metal on stone above his head. He did not take the time to analyze Stefnir's next move before rolling out of his vulnerable position at the other man's feet. He leapt back up to a standing position, spinning around with his shield raised in time to block another lethal blow meant to take an arm off.

Stefnir rose up to his full height before throwing his weight behind his sword, trying to force Hiccup's arm to buckle under the force exerted. Admittedly, Hiccup's arm was shaking as he pushed back with all his strength. He gritted his teeth and continued to resist, beads of sweat breaking out across his brow. He took a chance, stomping down on Stefnir's instep.

The other man howled and recoiled, hopping back with puffing cheeks, incensed.

"You're never going to win this," Stefnir snarled. "Run and evade "that's all you know how to do! You're a slippery cuss, I'll give you that, but I'll take your head off before you so much as cut me."

"Mm, wanna bet your marriage on that?" Hiccup cocked his head with a sardonic pout. "Oh, wait "

Growing up with a cousin like Snotlout, he was no stranger to threats of bodily harm, no matter what Stefnir claimed he would do to him. Hiccup took advantage of Stefnir's momentarily lapse of

concentration, too caught up in posturing and taunts, by suddenly throwing all his weight behind his own shield, driving it into the other man's broad torso with his shoulder. Stefnir staggered back a couple of paces and Hiccup deployed the grappling line contained within his shield's center hub.

The cord tightly wound itself around Stefnir's legs and Hiccup flipped a small switch along the shield's rim. The line started to reel back in, yanking the other Viking's legs out from underneath him. Stefnir fell hard, gasping as the wind was knocked out of him. Sword still firmly gripped in his hand, he was not quite vulnerable enough. Hiccup released the cord when it grew tight and was no longer effective at pulling Stefnir's dead weight. It fell to the ground as Hiccup advanced.

There was a mixed reaction from the crowd above. Most of the village seemed to be cheering Hiccup on, if only because he currently held the advantage, but a fair number of Stefnir-supporters shouted their protests, interspersed with a few creative obscenities.

Stefnir sliced through the grappling line with a sharp jerk of his sword. He was still untangling himself when Hiccup swung the Dragon Blade, cutting the other man's bicep cleanly, and not too deep.

With a furious expletive, Stefnir sprung out of Hiccup's reach, hand clapped over the oozing gash. Blood overflowed his bracing hand, trickling in thick rivulets down his arm, running between his fingers and knuckles, pooling in his palm curled around his sword's grip.

Hiccup inclined his head. "First blood."

"You miserable, cheating son of a b!tch!"

"One sword, one shield of our choosing. That's what we agreed to," Hiccup reminded him. "This happens to be the one I chose." He raised his glinting shield pointedly.

"Good thing this is not a fight to first bloodâ€"not that I was ever going to stop it there," Stefnir growled, "and good thing you don't know how to hit. This is barely anything worth mentioning!"

Hiccup narrowed his eyes. Stefnir's breathing was labored slightly, and his shoulders were tense. The corner of his lips turned down in a grimace, and tremors ran down his wounded arm. Whatever brave face he put on was a matter of pride. He could jeer all he wanted about Hiccup's inability to cut deep, but that strike had been deliberate. Tactical.

Stefnir's power would be diminished in that arm. His dominate arm.

Hiccup could not overpower him, but he could outsmart and incapacitate his opponent. Defensively offensive, requiring as little effort as possible for maximum damage. How few hits could he manage before Stefnir yielded to him?

That was the real conundrum.

Stefnir shook off his pain, resorting to his two-hand grip again. He

charged at Hiccup, raising his sword and providing another, wonderful opportunity. Hiccup knew his next best move was to disarm Stefnir somehow, so he fired the small bola from his shield and it connected with Stefnir's blade, sending it flying halfway across the arena.

Stefnir's shout of rage was drowned out by the surrounding tumult—cheers or boos, Hiccup did not really care. He seized the opportunity to go on his cautious offensive. He ran towards the other Viking, but Stefnir dove for the shield he had discarded earlier. With the tip of his foot, he kicked it up into his hand and flung it like a discus. Hiccup deflected it with his own shield, but the distraction had given Stefnir the head start he needed to recover his sword.

>He fumbled with the bolas, trying to free his blade from the ropes. The more he wrestled with it, the more frantic and uncoordinated his efforts became, for as formidable an opponent as he was when focused, Stefnir grew into nothing more coordinated than a rampaging dragon the more perturbed he became.<p>

Hiccup charged, prepared to aim for the back of a leg. A well-aimed, stinging cut to the bend of the knee would give Stefnir another disadvantage—but he anticipated Hiccup's move. Dropping his own bound-up sword, Stefnir jumped out of the way, narrowly missed by the Dragon Blade. He reached out and seized Hiccup's forearm in a vice-like grip on the upswing. Hiccup's heart seized, and he tried to wrench free, but Stefnir was undeniably stronger.

Holding Hiccup's sword arm in place, Stefnir grabbed the Hiccup's shield with his free hand. In one fluid motion, he pulled it from Hiccup's arm. Then, he swung the shield through the air, hitting Hiccup hard across the forehead with a sickening crack before swiping it back in the opposing direction. Another hard hit.

Spots flew in Hiccup's vision and he felt a sharp, burning sting ripple across his head, brain seeming to throb in his skull. There was a warm gush of blood down the side of his face. His head was foggy and he teetered on his feet, disoriented. He was vaguely aware of his shield clattering against a distant stone wall, but he succumbed to the shooting pain as Stefnir bent his other arm back in a crippling hold. The Dragon Blade was ripped from his fingers and he dropped to his knees. He was at the mercy of Stefnir's merciless grip and the aching spasms in his left shoulder, coursing up from his twisted arm. Vulnerable and reeling from the blow to the head, Hiccup could not defend himself from the knuckles that connected with the side of his face, digging into the ridge beneath his eye with an unforgiving ferocity that felt as though his cheek has been bust open.

He felt Stefnir release him as he toppled onto all fours, blinking the microbursts of light from his vision. A vaguely familiar voice—one of his friends, perhaps—shouted, "GET UP!"

Hiccup hesitantly reached up to feel the fresh laceration on his temple, raw and sticky. It felt deep and it was bleeding freely, as head wounds often did. He lowered his hand and glanced down at his fingertips, slick with his blood, before glancing up at Stefnir, in possession of the Dragon Blade and his own sword, newly freed.

Shield. He needed to get to his shield.

His head was feeling fuzzy and the cut on his forehead pounded as he rose to his feet.

Great. Stefnir hardly needed another advantage, tall and brawny, and suddenly armed with two blades.

Hiccup noticed his shield was lying a couple of yards from where the other man stood. He darted forward and Stefnir lunged at him, but without his shield, Hiccup knew he was outmatched. He had no choice but to evade, twisting his torso as two swords swung at him in mid-sprint. The Dragon Blade narrowly missed, but Stefnir had greater reach and the second sword caught Hiccup right above his left hip.

The yelp was automatic as Hiccup clamped his hand over his newest injury. His own touch was searing and his grimaced, feeling new, warm dampness through the slice in his tunic.

Stefnir had him on the run and they both knew it. The arrogant grin chasing him spoke volumes of the other man's confidence, of the victory that must already be playing out in his head.

Hiccup threw himself to the ground, snatching his shield as his shoulder skid along the rough stone. He barely had time to lift the thing before Stefnir was on him, thrusting and driving both weapons where Hiccup was lying, deflecting each blow by the narrowest of margins.

"Give it up!" Stefnir taunted as swords clashed with Gronckle Iron. "If you surrender now, I promise I'll let you keep your other leg!"

Hiccup pushed back on his hands, somersaulting away from the other Viking while kicking out with his prosthetic leg. He could not feel the contact, but Stefnir swore and as Hiccup righted himself, shield raised, he caught a glimpse of the Dragon Blade sliding across the ground.

>His eyes flickered to the sword then back to Stefnir, eyeing him with a clear challenge. They were frozen for half a tremulous breath.<p>

Hiccup moved first, scrambling for his weapon as Stefnir bounded after him in parallel step.

Hiccup was growing very lightheaded, the gash in his head pulsing to the same rhythm of his racing heart. He could feel his hair clinging damp and sticky to his forehead, and light seemed to swim and glow brighter with a very fuzzy, diffused edge. Almost dreamlike. It was getting steadily worse, fresh blood dripping down his forehead, falling into his eyes, as old blood was caked to the side of his face and temple, dried into his eyebrow causing just enough agitation. His tunic felt soaked above his hip, blood gradually encompassing more fabric and seeping down into the waistline of his pants.

He managed to grab the Dragon Blade with an unsteady gait, and he heard Stefnir cackled as he lost his balance, staggering into the wall. The other man continued to attack as he remained fixed to the wall for support as Stefnir bore down on him. He desperately swung

his sword to parry Stefnir's blows, scooting along the wall to avoid the other blade. Sparks flew when the older man missed, sword rasping over stone.

"I've decided I don't want you to die, not that I could really get away with killing the chief's son," Stefnir said, swinging and stabbing, unconcerned with the repeated strikes against Gronckle Iron and stone. If it was a game of attrition he was playing, he certainly had the upper-hand. "It will be more satisfying to keep you alive, so you can spend rest of your life watching Astrid and I, together."

Hiccup sneered and with a labored grunt, he collected some manner of strength to push off the wall and throw Stefnir back. As he stepped around the older man, he flourished the Dragon Blade, delivering a nice, clean cut to the top of Stefnir's thigh.

Hiccup squinted his eyes to examine the dark stain spreading over Stefnir's leggings from a safe distance. Fine details were blurry, but the injured thigh was quivering, and Stefnir could only move in shuffling steps, taking sharp, hissing breaths between clenched teeth.

"You persistent little shit," Stefnir spat.

"Thisâ€¦can all be overâ€¦if you justâ€¦yield," Hiccup panted, the throbbing of his head injury nearly making him go cross-eyed. It was beyond a simple laceration. Those two, powerful blows to the head and jostled his brain and he felt nauseous.

"You first!" Stefnir snarled.

He aimed another swipe at Hiccup's side but the Dragon Blade parried. Stefnir then braced himself on his wounded leg, delivering a strong kick to the Gronckle Iron shield before he buckled with cry, unable to support himself any longer.

Hiccup was thrown back into the heavy door that once confined Hookfang. His head connected with solid metal and his vision went totally black for a moment. He shook his head vigorously, his sight returning in hazy colors and shapes.

"You know, I take it back. How about I chop of your other leg so you have a matching set?" Stefnir growled, rising to his feet, his injured leg badly shaking. He hobbled forward, no less deterred.

Hiccup glanced up at Stefnirâ€”trying to make sense of his double vision-knowing he had no more tricks left in his shield that would be particularly useful. Sure, the shield could transform into a makeshift crossbow, but he had no arrows or comparable projectiles to fire. There was a tiny catapult at the top, but what was a small rock going to do, even if he had one?

He only had one option left, remembering the way Hookfang burst from his pen frenzied and aflame. Hiccup recalled his momentary paralysis, rooted to the spot as the Monstrous Nightmare raged over the dome of the kill ring. Stefnir advanced, sword raised, and Hiccup glanced down at the Dragon Blade in his left hand, praying to Odin Allfather, for his strength and lucidity were failing him. His coordination and

balance were already pitiful, at best.

Stefnir reached out and grabbed him by the throat, pinning him against the metal door as if he could still move aggressively. Thick fingers clenched around his windpipe and he coughed.

Stefnir leveled the tip of his sword with his face and whispered, "You should have yielded to me when you had the chance."

"Stillâ€¦I have my trump cardâ€¦" Hiccup muttered.

His thumb rolled over a switch on the Dragon Blade's grip. Inside the hilt, there was a small strikerâ€”two pieces of flint colliding to make a spark filtered through an opening at the base of the blade. It connected with the metal, coated with a fine sheen Monstrous Nightmare saliva that had painted the inside of the sheath before the match. The sword caught fire immediately, and Hiccup pressed the blade flat against Stefnir's arm. The other man recoiled instantly, releasing Hiccup's neck, howling in pain from his shiny, blistering new burn.

"W-What is _that?_" Stefnir snapped, cradling his arm against his chest.

Hiccup slid up the wall by degrees, rubbing his throat.

"Inferno," he replied.

There had been a time Hiccup thought his idea was too lofty, fueled by unrealistic expectations of himself and well-meaning enthusiasm. He had been at a loss for how to ignite metalâ€”but dragons were his inspiration, and dragons had been the solution. Monstrous Nightmare saliva was a persistent substance. It clung to nearly any surface, always highly flammable. Almost as soon as Hiccup had completed the prototype, he imagined a retractable blade, like Toothless's fangs, coated with Monstrous Nightmare spittle as it was pulled back inside the grip. All brilliant ideas. All to be explored contingent upon him walking out of the arena in one pieceâ€”or rather, as many pieces as he had first walked in with.

"A flaming sword!" Stefnir growled in disbelief.

Hiccup imagined him pale and wide-eyed. "You soundâ€¦surprised," he replied, managing a smug grin.

"I don't care what pathetic little invention you use," Stefnir retorted, but there was a waver in his voice, and Hiccup did not need perfect vision to know eyes were darting warily to the Dragon Blade.

He staggered forward and their swords clashed again, but it was not like before. Stefnir was not as ruthless. His attacks were not as deliberate. Under his opponent's mask of fury, Hiccup detected a glimmer of fear and awe every time he swung the Dragon Bladeâ€”or as he affectionately had dubbed it, Inferno. Stefnir was more on the defensive than he had ever been. His own sword moved in quick swipes to parry. He did not attempt to overtake Hiccup as they moved into the center of the arena. His posture was less bold, his injured arm and his leg were hindering free range of motion on top of it all, and

the flames of Inferno kept him on edge.

Whenever he did try to attack, it was careful and hesitant. His movements were awkward as he tried to combine both offensive and defensive swordplay to avoid another burn. He was fixated on the blade and was not paying as much attention to Hiccup, like the sword was its own disembodied entity.

Hiccup's weaker swordplay skills were compensated by Stefnir's fear and distraction. Inferno was doing its job quite well. He was not on the run anymore, and he finally had a moment to think. He already had the other man handicapped on his dominant side, and disarming him was the surest path to victory before Stefnir could grow accustomed to a flaming sword, before he figured out a way around it.

Hiccup focused in on Stefnir's blade, glinting with sunlight as it swished and flicked through the air to counter him. It had been continuously beating against Gronckle Iron for most of the fight—an extremely hard and durable metal.

Hiccup knew well just about every weapon on Berk, having worked on them all at least once. Stefnir had the bad habit of over-training, and wearing down his old sword with only a whetstone used sparingly for maintenance. Gobber had offered to treat his weathered blade, reinforcing it, and Stefnir had stubbornly declined—out of pride, perhaps, amid his demands for the wedding. Or because he did not see the utility in paying for what he believed could be remedied with a few grinds against a whetstone? If it broke, he could buy a new one without blinking.

Yes, Hiccup knew that sword, knew where it was weak. He knew in that moment how to win. Thank the Æsir for whatever threads of fate had tied him to Gobber's mentorship in his youth.

He lowered his sword intentionally, discarding his shield, giving Stefnir the chance to strike. The other Viking did not hesitate, thrusting his blade forward with restraint. Hiccup stepped out of the way and bent his free elbow, catching Stefnir's arm in the crook of his own. He would only be able to hold the larger man for a moment, but it was all the time he needed.

He took a deep breath and raised Inferno above his head.

Years of working in a smithy had trained his muscles. He might not be a wonder of weightlifting, but he had a mean downswing. Squinting to unite all the swords swimming in his vision, he brought the Dragon Blade hard, deliberate, and calculated against the offending weapon, about three to four inches from the tip where it was structurally weakest, particularly true for Stefnir's blade. It was as comfortable and fluid a motion as wielding the smithy hammer he had pounded against molten iron for hours on end, for years. Stefnir's blade shattered into two distinct pieces—the main body and the broken tip—falling from his outstretched hand.

Hiccup nearly laughed in relief. The gods were being uncharacteristically nice to him.

Stefnir wrenched his arm free from Hiccup's, staring at him, dumbfounded. Hiccup knew, in the back of his muddled mind, the crowd had been watching the entire time, but he had managed to tune them

out in favor of concentrating on, well, _not dying._ In that moment, perhaps because he and Stefnir were equally startled and momentarily stunned, Hiccup's brain was not racing in a daze. The deafening cheers of their audience seemed to assault him in one, a sudden cacophony. He and Stefnir continued to stare one another down, breathing heavily.

Had he won? Was the fight over?

The throbbing of his head and sharp pain from his side certainly had him hoping so.

"Yield?" Hiccup asked wearily, head spinningâ€"that was not a good sign.

Stefnir glared at him, fists shaking with rageâ€"or rather, Hiccup assumed that was what he saw. His opponent was becoming an increasingly indistinct figure. He blinked and shook his clouded head.

Then something barreled into him with what felt like the force of a dragon.

>Hiccup barely registered that Stefnir had tackled him before he felt an intense, stabbing pain in his right shoulder. He cried out in agonyâ€"that crippling pain that immobilized him! The older man had him pinned to the ground and was driving a jagged shard of his broken sword deep into his shoulder. There was no coherent thought in Hiccup's mind other than how much it hurt. A splintered blade was spearing and twisting through sinew with a white hot pain that extended down to his fingertips. To further incapacitate him, Stefnir used his free hand to grab a fistful of his hair, slamming his head against the stone for good measure. Hiccup's vision went black and his brain felt scrambled. He made a feeble attempt to sit up, but the world swirled around him and he fell back against the ground, writhing.<p>

"Did you really think the fight was over?" Stefnir snapped. "Just because you broke my sword with your dirty tricks? Here I thought you had the decency to fight fair."

"Notâ€"tricks," Hiccup groaned. "Strategy."

He did his best to swing left arm, to attack with the Inferno, but he only managed graze Stefnir's bicep. The other man yowled, but as he twisted the hilt of the shattered blade embedded in Hiccup's shoulder. It felt like something in his shoulder gave. His right arm felt limp and separate from his body, like a dead limb grafted to him. Inferno clattered to the ground as Hiccup's left hand clamped down on Stefnir's wrist, pleadingly.

Stefnir seized the blazing sword, brandishing it in the air triumphantly.

"I told you I didn't care what pathetic invention you used!" he said gleefully. "You're done. You know it. I know. _They _know it..."

Unintelligible shouting came from the spectators above, but it was as if Hiccup had his head underwater. His blunt fingernails clawed at Stefnir's arm, sticky with dried blood and sweat and all his

effort.

Hiccup glanced up at him, and his vision flickered like a candle on the verge of burning out. Two Stefnirs had him pinned with wicked grins.

Oh, dear Odin. One of him was enough.

Hiccup whimpered, closing his eyes. That was how it was all going to end. His right arm was paralyzed and he was too weak, too defeated to do anything more than moan beseechingly for his opponent to stop, to show him some semblance of mercy.

He had been foolish to think he stood any chance against Stefnir. No matter how much "Hiccup flair" he threw at the other Viking, there was no denying that he was never going to be a fighter on the same scale as Stefnir Svenson. He had been outmatched from the start. Stefnir had been born and raised to fight in a time before peace, and he did it well. Hiccup's inventions had bought him time. They drew out the holmgang and had made it interesting for the spectators. But, in the end, it did not matter. He had been deluding himself from the start. Everyone had tried to warn him, but what choice did he have? What choice did Astrid have?

Stefnir was going to defeat him with his own sword. Maybe take an arm off. He hoped it was the right one. He was quite partial to his left hand. Ambidexterity did not necessarily mean he lacked a dominant side.

He laughed inwardly.

Why was that so funny? Was he delirious?

His head. Oh, how it was hurting. It throbbed. Ow. The gash on his forehead was still painful, too. Sharp and begging for what remained of his consciousness that he did not have to spare.

"This is for you, Astrid!" Stefnir shouted from what sounded like a world away. It was mocking, to rub salt in a wound.

Astrid. She was watching. Hiccup felt a stab of sympathy—or was that just the blade in his shoulder? He could not tell anymore. But Astrid had been counting on him. He had been carrying both of their futures into the fight, only to fumble them. They were going to be happy, had he won. He had thought they had a chance, but she was only going to watch him lose. Horrifically. She was going to have to marry Stefnir and spend the rest of her life with him, have his children.

Suddenly, Hiccup thought he had the better fate between the two of them.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," Stefnir gibed.

Hiccup didn't think he sounded sorry at all. He wondered vaguely if the gods would let him into Valhalla if he bled to death after Stefnir was done with him. Was that a good enough warrior's death? Maybe the other seventeen years of his life would not count against him?

Hiccup gave another mental chuckle. Damn, his head really hurt. Stefnir had really done a number on him with his shield earlier. That had been the deciding factor before the fight even concluded. It had been downhill from there.

>Wow, his head. That shield. Damn.<p>

The shield!

Hiccups eyes snapped open. Stefnir was poised above him, sword raised above his head, the dancing flames on the tip of Inferno Hiccup's only sight guide. Everything slowed down.

Hiccup glanced at his right arm—the arm rendered useless by Stefnir's twisting blade fragment. His Gronckle Iron shield was reflecting the sunlight just beyond it, the only real detail Hiccup could make out. His left arm shot across his body, grasping the shield loose as Inferno began its downward arc. His eyes then darted to the general, unprotected vicinity of Stefnir's lower abdomen and groin. In the blinding pride of impending victory, Stefnir could not see his mistake. There was only a split second to react, taking advantage of his fatal confidence.

Hiccup gathered up the last remaining bit of strength he could muster, and slammed his shield diagonally into Stefnir stomach and groin, not quite sure where it hit, but certain it landed somewhere sensitive.

Stefnir yelped and dropped the Dragon Blade. Hiccup felt the heat of his beside his face. The older man curled in on himself until he was one solid, dark mass in Hiccup's vision—blending colors and shapes, filtering between glaring light and shadows. Hiccup then pushed himself up as best he could, with an immobilized arm. Adopting Stefnir's earlier strategy, he rammed the shield into the underside of the other man's jaw, like iron uppercut. Stefnir coughed and sputtered, and his weight was gone, the broken sword no longer sinking into muscle.

Flailing blindly, Hiccup swung the Gronckle Iron shield one last time, and it connected with the side of his opponent's head. The impact was displaced throughout Hiccup's body, agitating his aching head. The great, black, lump of Stefnir toppled sideways onto the ground. He tried to collect himself, rolling on to all fours.

Hiccup, fueled by nothing but determination and grit, scrambled to his feet, feeling the ground undulate underneath him, knees trembling. Right arm useless, he picked up Inferno with his left hand and stumbled over to Stefnir who was still reeling from the blow to the head, or groin, or both. He actually flinched as Hiccup approached and held up his hands in a defensive manner.

"Do you yield?" Hiccup murmured, holding Inferno out in a loose grip. He felt the blade rattling in his hand.

"Whatâ€?" Stefnir rasped.

"Do. You. Yield?" Hiccup asked him more forcefully, moving the blade closer to his skin for emphasis. There was an urgency while he still had it in him to stand.

>Stefnir cowered back from the flames.<p>

"Astrid isn't yours," Hiccup said. The Dragon Blade nearly slipped from his fingers. "Say it and end this."

"Fine," Stefnir conceded, strained, still rigid and defensive. His voice sounded thick, and he spat on the ground, copious blood that Hiccup could not see. "I yield! You can have her! More trouble than she's worth! Fuck you! Fuck her! I'm done with this yakshit. Just get the fuck away from me. I'm done. _Done._"

Hiccup wished he had some shred of energy or clarity to whoop and celebrate his victory, for he had just won everything—but his body was failing. What good was winning then if he did not ultimately survive it? The world was a dizzying wheel, spinning ever faster, and he bent forward, hands on his knees.

Somewhere far off in some dark vacuum, Gobber declared. "Hiccup wins the _holmgang!_"

There were cheers, there were boos. Hiccup could not tell which were more numerous. He felt himself begin to sway dangerously on the spot. He reached up and grasped the hilt of Stefnir's sword that was sticking out of his shoulder. Even a tiny jostle of the blade drew a hiss from his throat and brought a new level of tenderness to his shoulder.

He took a deep breath, and pulled free. Blood ran hot and unencumbered from the wound, and his breath came in short gasps that irritated the cut on his side with anything more than shallow inhales. Inferno fell from his hand but he did not hear it hit the ground. In fact, he no longer hear anything aside from the frantic hammering of his heart in his ears, trying desperately to maintain a rapidly dwindling blood volume.

He broke out into a cold sweat. He glanced up at the crowd, hoping to Thor someone recognized how much trouble he was in. It felt like he was momentarily adrift, weightless. He was vaguely aware he was falling before he was swallowed up by a mute blackness.

* * *

><p>Astrid had not moved for what felt like an eternity. She might as well have been fused to the stool, pulled up alongside Hiccup's bed. The moment he had hit the ground in the ring, she was pushing through the densely packed crowd to get to him, feeling the bile rise in her throat. Stoick's voice boomed over the scene, calling for the healers and time sort of ran together after that.<p>

The sunlight filtering in through the open window had changed from the soft brilliance of morning to a harsh, reddish glow, casting long shadows on the walls as particles of dust swirled through the setting beams. It had been a flurry of activity that shunted Astrid back against the wall while healers descended on Hiccup like a bunch of vultures. It was like the aftermath of the Red Death all over again, complete with bloodied rags thrown haphazardly over shoulders, and the pull of black thread being fashioned into stitches. Astrid had felt just as terrified and helpless then as she did after the Red Death. Both times, Stoick had gruffly suggested she leave, and both times, she had stubbornly stayed under the guise of learning. In all actuality, she felt she owed it to Hiccup.

Or so she told herself, to make amends. All those years she had been cold to him, and he had sacrificed everything for a village that had mistreated him. Three years later, he had endured Astrid's self-serving head games, only fight on her behalf, still in love with her with all her selfishness and shortcomings. She was indebted to him—"all of Berk was for the Red Death incident and the peace he had championed"—but Hiccup would never collect. He suffered and forgave. Resilient, but thankfully out of it for the worst, most immediate part of his healing.

In both instances, three years ago and the present, he would occasionally mumble something as the healers worked on him. He was delirious and slipping in and out of a vague consciousness he would not remember.

"Stop", "please", and "hurts" were all Astrid could ever make out, pressed back against the wall, well out of the way with her fingernails digging little crescent moons into her face.

The first time, she had left after he was stable. Stoick had remained by his side with Toothless, Hiccup's watchful protector. Nobody neared the injured boy without clearing it with the dragon, first.

Three years later, not much had changed. The Night Fury had been brought in as soon as Hiccup was no longer critical. The dragon was beside himself, warbling his lament over his human's injuries, distraught when Hiccup did not wake for him. With a doleful whimper, Toothless curled up at the foot of the bed. There, he remained unmoving and despondent, head lifting only when someone entered the room.

It was mostly Stoick, routinely checking in. He would nod to Astrid before approaching his son, placing a large hand on Hiccup's bandaged forehead with paternal tenderness. He never said anything, only lingered for a moment before stepping out again.

Astrid and Toothless were the constants, though encroaching nightfall meant Astrid would have to return home and face her parents, whom she had been deliberately avoiding since the end of the fight. Though, what was there left to be sad? A facetious "I hope you're happy now"? It would not undo the holmgang. Their frustration could not rebind Astrid to Stefnir when, legally, he had lost all claim as her fiancé. They could not promise her to someone else when, by all legal accounts, she "belonged" to Hiccup. Really, what else could they, or anyone else do? The holmgang had been fairly fought and decisively won. Astrid had every right to sit by Hiccup's bed, avoiding the fallout in the village—"gossip upon more gossip she did not care to hear.

She had Hiccup's hand in hers, squeezing it gently to elicit a response, but none came. Not a twitch, nor a reflexive curl of his fingers. She sighed, heavy and resigned, scooting closer to the bed and rousing Toothless with the scrape of wood. The Night Fury studied her as she gently brushed Hiccup's filthy bangs from his face. That earned her a faint groan, but his eyes remained closed. His head fell to the side and his brow furrowed. Astrid cast Toothless an inquisitive glance, but he ultimately approved of her efforts, dropping his head back to his claws.

"I don't think I'll ever understand you," she said to Hiccup, and he was still again apart from slow, steady breathing. She muttered glumly, "You have such a reckless disregard for your own wellbeing. Liking you is bad for my healthâ€"yours too, apparently."

"Occâ€|upationalâ€|hazard," Hiccup slurred, head lolling on his pillow. His eyes barely cracked open. He did not look at her at first. He stared at the adjacent wall, blinking sluggishly.

Astrid let out a short, elated burstâ€"a gasp of excitement that brought Toothless to his feet. The Night Fury bounded to the head of the bed, warbling excitedly. Hiccup broke out into a tired smile, reached out feebly.

"Hey bud," he murmured, his hand sliding passively over black scales and Toothless nuzzled into his hand. "Good to see you." Green eyes turned toward Astrid, and a little more life and clarity returned to his face. "Heyâ€|"

"That's all you have to say for yourself?" Astrid asked incredulously, suppressing the urge to swat him in his battered state. Her eyes burned with several hours of barely contained tears, but she would not shed them then.

Hiccup frowned, squirming slightly and wincing as his injuries made themselves known. He touched his fingers gingerly to his forehead, hissing and withdrawing them at once. "Ow?" he offered, voice a weak rasp. "Feel like I got run over by a pack of Gronckles."

"Stefnir really did a number on you," Astrid replied. Her hand fell to his bare chest, fingers wandering aimlessly over freckled skin. She felt his heart beating steadily beneath his fingers and she would have laid her head down on him, were he not so fragile.

"Oh. So, same thing, basically." His sarcasm was a welcome sign of recovery, still pale as he was. His left hand came up to grasp hers with all those familiar callouses. "Did I win?" he asked earnestly.

Astrid was taken aback. She cocked her head, eyes narrowed. "You don't remember?"

"No. The last thing I remember clearly is getting knocked in the head by my shield. The details are fuzzy after that."

Astrid laughed wryly. Shaking her head, she told him, "Yes. You won. Stupidly. Impossibly, but you did it."

Hiccup smiled. That time, it reached his eyes. "Good. Stefnir will leave you alone, then."

Astrid huffed, pulling her hand free to fold her arms irritably. After everythingâ€"their affair, the grief, his injuriesâ€"his priorities were still horribly skewed. They always had been, from dragons to relationships, but there was something so charming in it.

And infuriating.

"And we'll be together," she said firmly, because it was never about her misfortune or his, and who was more in need of rescuing. It was always about them and what they had to potential to be.

Hiccup laughed, then grimaced as the cut in his side was agitated. "That too," he replied, stroking Toothless idly. Then, with great effort, he sat up, swearing under his breath the whole way. The Night Fury gave him a boost, growling with concern, but he was an enabler. Astrid rolled her eyes, because whatever the most advisable course of action wasâ€"like ample restâ€"Hiccup was going to do the opposite.

"Am I missing anything?" he asked seriously, surveying his body, counting his limbs.

Astrid wrinkled her nose. "I hate to tell you this, but your left leg is gone."

Hiccup stared at her, sardonically. "Funny." He then glanced down at his right arm, immobilized in a leather sling and sighed, eyes dulled with his disappointment.

"Stefnir tore up your shoulder pretty bad," she explained. "They say you'll have to keep your arm in a sling until the muscles heal. Then it'll take some working with it to get the range of motion back."

He nodded, initial distress morphing into that willful determination. "I'll manage," he said. His gaze flickered to hers, uncertainly. "Howâ€"how are you?"

"_Me?_" Astrid remarked, incredulous for the second time. "I'm not the one who nearly got an arm hacked off!" She gestured to it emphatically.

"I-I mean, with your parents!" he clarified, left hand held up in appeasement. "The Svensonsâ€"I can't imagine there won't be some backlash."

Astrid scoffed. "It doesn't really matter what they think anymore, does it? The holmgang means I'm free from that arranged marriage. What they want doesn't really matter unless you broke up with me, for some reason. I'm fair game if that happens."

"Break up with you?" Hiccup mused, as if the words were completely foreign. "A-After all of that? Whâ€"why_ would I everâ€"?"

Astrid smirked, finally rising from her stool to sit down beside him.

"So you aren't completely brainless. Good to know, if we're going to take a real shot at this."

The corners of his mouth twitched. There was something intently warm in his gaze, unaffected by the pain and damage Stefnir had inflicted on the rest of him. Flesh marred, his heart remained unscathed. He took Astrid's hand in his with an awkward reach across his body, since his right arm was useless.

"I think I would really like to kiss youâ€"with impunity, that is.

Finally," he said.

Astrid gave him a coy little shake of her shoulders, but leaned in anyway. She snickered, "Look at you, all banged up. I don't know. I might hurt youâ€|"

His fingers along her jaw stirred up all kinds of delicious static beneath her skin. "I've had worse."

Their lips met and Astrid's eyes fluttered closed. Unable to really touch him anywhere, one hand feel to his knee while the other fisted in his hair, mindful of the bandages. It felt like the first real kiss they had ever sharedâ€"it was not a chaste peck of bashful children, and it was not laced with guilt and regret. It was honest and untainted. Astrid felt a giddy rush as the realization hit her that it was over. Everything. All the unpleasantness leached out of their lives through the blood Hiccup had spilled n the ring for her. For them. She could not have fought for him. She could not erase the lies that had crushed him, nor the anguish of two years of mutually supported misery. All they could do was move forward on the path was completely open to them. The past two years had never happened. Who was Stefnir Svenson? Hiccup could have just beaten her in a dragon race, for all she knew, and the kiss was an exhilarated congratulationsâ€"like it always should have been, like it was always meant to be.

Like it always would be.

End
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